the BOOK of AARON

a LOST BOOK of the PENTATEUCH

by

JULIAN of the JAINS

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THE ANTICHRIST

who verily doth dwell and walk among thy number

CHAPTER 1

And it came to pass, my dear Hosius, that long ago in Egypt, before the Ptolemies took over, pharaohs still ruled the land, as they had for two thousand years before that; and herein do I chronicle one of those pharaohs, the one which some of your people still call Ramses.

This tale of Ramses begins just after a military campaign to the north, to Canaan, to subdue and enslave the Semitic tribesmen that lived there. Pharaoh's generals brought a great multitude back to Egypt and put them to work. By this time, the great construction projects of Egypt had already long since been completed – the pyramids and Sphinx had already loomed o'er the land for a millennium. Pharaoh put the Canaanites to work as domestic laborers: the Canaanite men tended to agriculture and animal husbandry, and the Canaanite women cooked, cleaned, and tended to children – both the children of Egypt, and the children of Israel.

The Sphinx was one of several oracles scattered around the Mediterranean. Ramses, being the most divine mortal in the Egyptian empire, found that the Sphinx was the only conscious creature whose speech could surprise him. Everything else he was told by anyone else was either something he had already thought of before, or something whose flaws and weaknesses he could discern immediately. But the utterances of the Sphinx consistently amazed him. He was fascinated by the Sphinx and spent much of his time in its presence, asking it questions and posing it riddles. The Sphinx always answered Pharaoh's riddles correctly, and while Pharaoh occasionally managed to decipher the Sphinx's riddles, this was a rare occurrence. The fact that Pharaoh was able to do this at all was the wellspring of esteem and exaltation he enjoyed throughout the empire.

And lo, there were murmurings that Pharaoh had become half-hearted in his reign. These murmurings said he engaged in so much discourse with the Sphinx merely because he enjoyed it, and not because he needed advice to run the empire. But this was not true. Pharaoh was beset with a real problem whose solution he hoped to glean from the Sphinx's pronouncements.

As was the custom in those days, Pharaoh was married to his sister. Their union was peaceable, but marred by a lack of sons. They had twelve daughters, the youngest of whom was ten years old. Her name was Zipporah. She, and each of her eleven sisters, had brought the fleeting hope that she would be born a son; but lo, that kept not happening.

One day, Pharaoh queried unto the Sphinx, saying: "Would a daughter of Egypt bear a son if the father were her own?" To which the Sphinx replied: "Any father who joins with any of his daughters in the land of Egypt shall be drawn down into the waters unto death, and the sons of Canaan shall inherit the daughters of Egypt."

Pharaoh was struck dumb with terror, as was his entourage, with all the courtiers and viziers and astronomers therein. But he dared not go to in opposition to the will of the Sphinx. What had seemed like such a simple and elegant solution to his problem – joining with and coming to know his daughters – had been flatly ruled out. He would have to find another way to secure the throne to his bloodline.

Pharaoh commissioned a sailing ship, and upon it sent Joseph, his chief vizier, to Delphi, where Pythia, the female counterpart to the Sphinx, resided. Joseph explained Pharaoh's situation to her and ended with the same question Pharaoh had posed to the Sphinx: "Would a daughter of Egypt bear a son if the father were her own?" And, to his horror, Pythia issued the same pronouncement, verbatim, that the Sphinx had: "Any father who joins with any of his daughters in the land of Egypt shall be drawn down into the waters unto death, and the sons of Canaan shall inherit the daughters of Egypt."

Oh, how Pharaoh wailed and gnashed his teeth, when Joseph returned to Egypt and delivered the news! In Pharaoh's vision the sky darkened, and in his ears the heavens thundered, and in the soles of his feet he felt the earth tremble.

The next day, his terror and disappointment gave way to serene resolve. He would order that all sons of Canaan throughout Egypt be put to the khopesh, regardless of age. And then, he would join with his daughters, starting with his eldest, Mehreet, down the ranks through the other eleven, and then again in reverse, with the last being the first and the first being last. He would join with them as often as he could until the inevitable day when the words of the Sphinx and the words of Pythia were made manifest, when he would be drawn down into the waters unto death. For even though this plan would inexorably kill him, at least his throne would be secured unto his bloodline. It would no longer be possible for the sons of Canaan to inherit his daughters if he cleansed the land of Canaanite males.

CHAPTER 2

Pharaoh spake the order unto his courtiers, and his youngest daughter, Zipporah, overheard. Despite her youth, Zipporah had her own plantation, which had its own housemarm, a Canaanite woman who ran the household and took care of trivial matters beneath Zipporah's station. All of Pharaoh's daughters had an arrangement like this, each with her own plantation and housemarm, but the relationship was often cold. But Zipporah was warm toward her housemarm, who was named Jochebed. Zipporah loved Jochebed better than her own mother, and Jochebed loved Zipporah as though she were her own daughter.

Jochebed and her husband, Amram, were Canaanites of the nation of Israel who had been lucky to land in such circumstances. They were of the tribe of Levi, one of the many tribes that had been captured in Canaan and brought to Egypt by Pharaoh's generals along with thousands of their Israelite countrymen. And, days before Joseph's return from Delphi, the Levites Amram and Jochebed had received the blessing of a baby son – Aaron the Levite.

Zipporah rushed home from Pharaoh's palace and informed Amram and Jochebed of her father's plan to put all Canaanite males to the khopesh. Amram and Jochebed were afraid, but Zipporah swore to hide them and protect them. She commanded Amram to run down to the banks of the Nile, near the granary where he usually toiled, and retrieve one of the many pitched baskets used to float grain down the river to where other Canaanites on Zipporah's plantation oversaw livestock.

Amram did as he was bid, and ran to the banks of the Nile where dozens of pitched baskets bobbed empty amid the bulrushes. As he passed the granary he saw numerous Canaanite men and boys murdered at Egyptian hands, and he became more and more afraid.

While they waited for Amram to return, Zipporah explained her plan to Jochebed. On the grounds of Zipporah's plantation there was a well. Aaron would be placed into the pitched basket and lowered into the well, where he might float in safety and comfort, rocked gently by the waters and kept out of sight of Pharaoh's marauding soldiers. In this way, Aaron could be drawn back up to feed at Jochebed's breast, and the remaining Canaanite slave girls on Zipporah's plantation could still draw up buckets of water as they saw fit. The well could serve both needs equally without intruding upon the other. Jochebed rejoiced at this plan and embraced Zipporah, overcome by her precocious mistress's compassion and generosity.

Their embrace was cut short by a single loud cry at the front door. The women opened the door and found Amram, newly dead, the stones beneath him soaked through with his blood. He had been gravely wounded by an Egyptian blade – but after retrieving the pitched basket, for there it lay, next to his body.

Jochebed wailed and gnashed her teeth, but Zipporah ignored her and took up the pitched basket, bringing it inside. Gently she lay the infant Aaron into the basket and, now joined by the grieving Jochebed, carried the last surviving Egyptian Canaanite male to her well.

The women lowered the infant scion of the Levites into the well of Pharaoh's last daughter. There he lay, seventy cubits below the land, while Jochebed and Zipporah returned to the doorway, where the latter woman bore witness to the former woman's grief over her dead husband Amram.

No one else in Zipporah's household was told of Aaron's presence in the well. Canaanite slave girls came and went to draw water from it, but Aaron was filled with the spirit of God and kept his peace during their visits. None of the slave girls ever set their eyes as unto the Levite scion, nor were their ears ever impinged upon by his cries. They came and went, oblivious, for the next seven years.

For seven years, Zipporah and Jochebed toiled as one to raise Aaron into the Levite scion that was his destiny. They loved him and grieved for him, fearing his loneliness in the pitched basket at the bottom of the seventy-cubit well. But they did not know Aaron was filled with the spirit of God, and kept his peace.

Once in the morning and once in the evening, Zipporah would sing for little Aaron. She stood near the well, but still apart from it, such that Aaron never saw her face. But Aaron heard her voice, and it filled him with the spirit of God. On these occasions Zipporah also spoke to Aaron, at length, but not about childish things. She put those topics away, because to speak of childish things near the well would arouse the suspicions of the Canaanite slave girls. Rather she narrated her sensory experience of the present moment to little Aaron, speaking of the weather, temperature, time of day, the colors and shapes of objects she saw, the appearances and behaviors of people she saw, the fragrances of animals and tastes of plants. She was his perceptual agent, continuously serializing all her present-moment sensory experiences into speech. And he lay in peace in his pitched basket, his ears assembling for him the vistas denied unto his eyes.

CHAPTER 3

Seven months after Pharaoh put all Canaanite men to the blade, his daughter next oldest from Zipporah, called Zuleikah, called upon Zipporah, and set foot on her plantation. Zuleikah wailed and gnashed her teeth, for she had just been visited by their father, Pharaoh, who had joined with her and made her bleed. She told her sister what Pharaoh had told her, of his plan to secure his throne to his bloodline by joining with his daughters.

Zipporah and Zuleikah clung to each other and wailed at the terrible thing their father had done. When their tears had dried, Zipporah called for Jochebed, who brought oranges to eat, and who brought knives to cut the oranges with, and who sat with her Egyptian mistresses. Together they ate of the oranges and spoke.

"Jochebed may be a Canaanite, but she is a wise and loving woman," Zipporah said unto Zuleikah. Then spaketh she to Jochebed: "How shall we right this wrong?"

"O mistress, I see no wrong here," said Jochebed.

Zuleikah trembled in anger. "My father has raped me this day," she said to Jochebed.

"That is a false accusation of rape," replied Jochebed.

Now Zipporah spake unto Jochebed, saying, "Why do you take the witness borne of my sister as false?"

Said Jochebed: "It is not false that she and her father hath joined together. But, among the peoples of Canaan, there is no evil in this. The bedrock of Israel is kin joining with kin. For verily, cannot a good basket be woven of reeds plucked from the same bulrush? We Levites have a long list of kinships unto whom our Lord God hath deemed unclean to join, and lo, a father joining with his daughter doth not appear therein. Yea, even may a Levite man join with his sister, just as Pharaoh joined with his sister to produce you. Levi himself was among the little children suffered to come unto Leah."

"I know not this Leah," said Zipporah.

"Leah was Levi's mother, who yearned to join with him."

"I care not what abominations you wicked Levites offer unto your ghastly Lord," said Zuleikah, and set down the orange she had eaten of. She brandished her knife, lunged across the circle at Jochebed, and cut the housemarm's right hand. Jochebed cried out and bled and could no longer use her hand. Jochebed fled.

Zuleikah saw Jochebed fleeing and began to weep, saying, "O, Zipporah, Zipporah, what shall I do?"

And Zipporah took her firmly and said, “No one shall agree with us that our cause is just. The men of Egypt and Canaan look upon our father and see nothing but a patriarch guaranteeing his legacy. And the women of Canaan are just as wicked and unclean as the men. No amount of right can right this wrong. Sometimes a second wrong alone shall be the righting of the first.”

Zuleikah spake, saying, “I take not thy meaning.”

Said Zipporah: “Call upon our eldest sister, Mehreet. She hath already joined with our father, seven months ago.”

Said Zuleikah: “How can this be? Mehreet is without child. Is the soil of her womb hardscrabble?”

And Zipporah said: “Nay, her womb is of dark soil. She was briefly with child. But, lo, she is in the confidence of a qedeshu, whose feminine medicine can purge a pregnancy if called upon.”

(*Qedeshu* was an Egyptian word meaning “temple whore.”)

Zuleikah asked, in amazement, “What medical arts are known to a lowly qedeshu?”

And Zipporah replied: “Saith wise men from the east that the tree gum, myrrh, has blood-moving powers, for purging stagnant blood from the womb. The qedeshu causes a woman with child to eat dram upon dram of myrrh, and rather than a perfected baby being delivered at term upon a tide of slime, an imperfect baby is delivered immediately, upon a tide of blood. The qedeshu’s art is in judging the amount of myrrh. Too little and the womb will not call forth this sea of red; too much, and the sea of red will draw down the mother unto death.”

Zuleikah embraced Zipporah and said, “Now shall I call upon our eldest sister, Mehreet.”

At the doorway Zuleikah said unto Zipporah: “How much do I owe you for your housemarm’s hand?”

Zipporah replied: “Thirty pieces of silver.”

And it came to pass that Mehreet, eldest daughter of Pharaoh, began a sort of tending of the fields of herself and her eleven younger sisters, in whom Pharaoh was working to plant his seed. Every daughter with whom he joined waited to see signs of pregnancy, and if they appeared, Mehreet arranged a secret meeting with the qedeshu to administer myrrh. How Pharaoh would have wailed and gnashed his teeth had he known! For lo, no one can know how many sons of Pharaoh were drowned in these seas of red. But he knew nothing of myrrh, and continued his steady planting.

CHAPTER 4

Years passed, until one day when Aaron the Levite had reached the age of seven years, Zipporah spake unto Jochebed, saying, “The scion of your tribe must be drawn up from the water for good.”

And Jochebed trembled, and replied, “O mistress, how shall he be kept secret? How shall he be saved from your father’s khopesh if he be freed from his bondage?”

Said Zipporah, “Hast thou not oft lamented thine inability to circumcise him? To be an Israelite man in a land with no rabbis is to forever wear the mark of a native of that land.”

And Jochebed, who had never thought of it that way, saw the truth of it, and exclaimed, “Lo, as a child, his salvation was found at the bottom of a shaft, but as a man, his salvation shall be found at the top of a shaft.”

This gladdened Zipporah’s heart, and she smiled unto her housemarm and said “Yes. As below, so above: the shaft, the rod, the staff, all may comfort thee.”

And it came to pass that Zipporah and Jochebed drew Aaron up from the water, and were glad; and Aaron was glad. The women washed him, and dried him, and gave him fine clothing, and a hot meal, and let him sleep in a bed, with comfort. Through it all, Aaron was filled with the spirit of God, and kept his peace.

The next day, Zipporah put on her finest raiment, and commanded Jochebed do the same; but she bade her housemarm to dress Aaron in rough raiment, yea, in rags. And the three of them rode in Zipporah’s litter on the backs of her slaves, to visit Pharaoh.

Pharaoh saw them and was gladdened but perplexed. “O daughter, why dost thou appear today? And who are these your companions?”

Zipporah spake unto Pharaoh, saying, “This is my housemarm. Today morning she found this boy in the fields of my plantation, weak and afraid. He speaketh not, nor make any sound.”

Pharaoh looked at Jochebed and said “The wellspring of thy blood is in Canaan?”

“Yes, master,” said Jochebed.

“What is your name, woman?”

“Jochebed, master.”

Pharaoh looked at Aaron and said, “The wellspring of thy blood is in Canaan?”

Aaron said, “The wellspring of my blood is a well.”

“What is your name, boy?”

“I am,” said Aaron.

Zipporah and Jochebed trembled at the strangeness of Aaron’s answers. They were afraid of what Pharaoh would say unto him.

But Pharaoh was filled with wonder, because Aaron’s answers reminded him of the Sphinx, and of Pythia.

“The boy is an oracle,” said Pharaoh unto the women. “Zipporah, thou shalt keep him as your own, and raise him unto manhood, and when he is a man he shall enter into my service.”

Unto Aaron he said, “Boy, Zipporah is your mother now.” And he bade them leave.

Aaron was troubled by Pharaoh’s pronouncement. He had not been sure whether his mother was Jochebed or Zipporah, and Pharaoh’s wording, at first so seemingly stark, still left room for confusion. Zipporah was his mother *now*, meaning she had not been before? Yet she had always addressed him as “my child,” “my sweet boy,” “my prince,” and other epithets of love, whereas Jochebed spake none of these things unto him. Had he not been merely a child, he would have regarded as decisive the observation that it was only ever Jochebed who suckled him at her breast, something Zipporah had never done. Did Pharaoh’s pronouncement mean that Zipporah would now assume this duty of Jochebed’s? Did it mean that he would be shifted from one breast to the other?

Aaron’s thoughts, my dear Hosius, trod these paths due to a characteristic of his mind that is common now in our time, but was unprecedented in those ancient days; a characteristic no one, including him, was aware of. Because so much of his early life had been spent in the pitched basket at the bottom of the well, seventy cubits below land, he had never learned to rely on simultaneities among his sensory impressions as markers for the identities of other people. Zipporah had spoken unto him and sung unto him often, but always while apart from the well, so during these occasions his ears had heard her voice, but his eyes had not seen her face. Jochebed, meanwhile, had often checked on Aaron’s repose, by tilting her head over the rim of the well and silently peering down into its darkness. On these occasions, his eyes saw her face, but his ears heard not her voice. And with Jochebed, but not Zipporah, there was an additional mode of sensory simultaneity that occurred while suckling. Aaron’s recognition of Jochebed was based on the confluence of her voice in his ears, as she cooed softly and nonverbally, her warmth on his skin, her scent in his nostrils, her taste in his mouth – but not her countenance in his eyes.

Yea, verily had Aaron’s own senses already been in disagreement about the identity of his mother. His tactile, olfactory, and gustatory senses believed her to be Jochebed, but his vision believed her to be Zipporah, and his hearing was confounded in excess of verdict either way. This was the perceptual schema operating within Aaron the Levite’s mind when Pharaoh’s simple declaration arrived. And behold! did it cause Aaron to believe that Pharaoh’s utterance had not been a statement about Aaron, but a command to Zipporah, to secure from Jochebed the title of motherhood otherwise withheld by the last of his sensory modalities still dissenting on the

matter. In Aaron the Levite’s utterly unique mind, Pharaoh had ordered Zipporah to become the woman offering unto Aaron her warmth on his skin, her scent in his nostrils, her taste in his mouth.

CHAPTER 5

Seven more years passed, and Aaron came to enter into Pharaoh's service. When Pharaoh sat upon his throne, presiding over his palace and the courtiers, viziers, and astronomers therein, Aaron sat upon a cushion on the floor beside Pharaoh's right foot. Aaron rarely spoke, but Pharaoh made it known that none should dare interrupt Aaron or fail to yield the floor when he interrupted them. Aaron vindicated Pharaoh's original impression of him, and proved to be a capable oracle. His opinions and pronouncements were astounding crypticisms and riddles of the highest order.

After seven months as a courtier, Aaron witnessed his first plague.

"Plague" comes from the Greek word *plaga*, which means "strike." It is worth taking a moment, my dear Hosius, to point out to your assembly, as they undertake the grand project before them, which has brought you all the way to Nicaea from your home in Hispania, the usefulness of the fact that *plaga* is regarded as a transitive verb by the language that birthed it, but "plague," strangely, was given no firm ground on which to stand in the language that midwifed it. Is it a noun or a verb? If a verb, is it transitive or intransitive? This polymorphism grants to your scribes and translators the option of preserving the true nature of *plaga* by rendering it as "strike," or of obscuring that true nature by rendering it as "plague." Hereafter, I shall use "strike" by default, and deploy "plague" only to dramatic ends.

After seven months as a courtier, Aaron witnessed his first plague, or rather, witnessed his first strike. A general of Pharaoh's armies was delivering unto Pharaoh a report on the status of a campaign he had waged against the Hyksos. The campaign had gone poorly, and Pharaoh was displeased. Pharaoh trembled and darkened with anger. He made a strike at the general, saying in a great and terrible voice: "The scorpions of the desert hath climbed upon thee, chittering and stinging and piercing!"

Aaron sat up, afraid. He had never seen Pharaoh, who was normally a man with a calm and steady demeanor, erupt in anger. But when he saw how the general reacted to Pharaoh's strike against him, Aaron's became not afraid, nay!, but transfixed with wonder and amazement.

For lo, upon hearing Pharaoh's strike against him, Pharaoh's general began to cry out in terror and pain, casting his hands about on his person, hither and thither like a beggar gone mad.

When Pharaoh made his strike against his general, the general, and Aaron, and all the courtiers and viziers and astronomers in attendance, had their eyes on Pharaoh. But when Pharaoh's general began his frenzy, all eyes shifted to him. And it was at this point that Pharaoh made his strike a second time, saying: "The scorpions of the desert hath climbed upon thee, chittering and stinging and piercing!"

Whereupon not only was the frenzy of Pharaoh's general intensified, but all the courtiers and viziers and astronomers of the palace began to writhe and cry out as well.

Aaron was baffled, but kept his peace. Pharaoh's utterance had been forceful and imposing, but it had not changed reality, or Aaron's perceptions of it. Aaron looked at Pharaoh and saw an Egyptian monarch girded in the finest raiment. Aaron looked at the men and women of the assembly and saw no scorpions. But the men and women of the assembly behaved as if *they* saw scorpions, appearing in the quantity described by Pharaoh's strike, and behaving in the manner described by it as well.

"If Pharaoh is a sorcerer, why do his spells not affect me?" wondered Aaron. But he kept his peace.

Eventually Pharaoh grew bored with his strike, and so redeemed it. He said, in a loud voice as like unto before, "Hark, my people! For the scorpions hath returned to their nests in the earth. The scorpions trouble thee no more." And the men and women of the assembly ceased their frenzy, and rejoiced and wept at their deliverance.

Aaron was confounded. The perceptual schema of the Egyptian mind seemed to inherently make itself available to the incursions of speech from others, if sufficiently bold and vivid it be. A forceful declaration of an imaginary state of affairs was, when heard by the Egyptian ear, made manifest, materialized, actualized, for that Egyptian, by his or her overall perceptual schema, of which hearing was one part. The other four senses could be synesthetically programmed by specially crafted input to the fifth. Or so Aaron began to suspect.

CHAPTER 6

Seven months after Pharaoh's plague of scorpions, Aaron learned he was to accompany Pharaoh to worship the Sphinx. This news gladdened his heart greatly, as Pharaoh was known throughout the land as one of the Sphinx's many devoted followers. The courtiers and viziers and astronomers had regaled unto Aaron with tales and legends of Pharaoh's interactions with the Sphinx. Aaron was eager to be in the presence of the Sphinx and witness its discussion with Pharaoh.

But none of the tales or legends told unto Aaron included that fateful exchange from long ago in which the Sphinx had forced Pharaoh to accept a fate of being drawn down into the waters unto death. As Pharaoh and Aaron rode together in Pharaoh's litter upon the backs of slaves, Aaron's heart was buoyant, but the heart of Pharaoh, filled with dreadful remembrance, was leaden.

When they arrived, Pharaoh configured them into a line opposite the Sphinx, with many dozens of cubits between the Sphinx and the center of the line. Aaron stood at the center of the line, directly behind Pharaoh, who walked halfway to the Sphinx and spake unto it, saying: "O Sphinx, I, Pharaoh, supreme ruler of all Egypt, hail thee and seek thy counsel."

Silence reigned as the Sphinx said nothing – just an implacable rictus hewn of stone. Yet did Aaron see Pharaoh nodding his head and bowing it down. Aaron looked to his left and then to his right and saw, all along the line of Pharaoh's courtiers, viziers, and astronomers, every one among them also nodding and bowing down their heads. Yet no utterance had been spoken except by Pharaoh himself.

"You prophesied that my plan for securing my throne to my bloodline would cause the daughters of Egypt to be inherited by the sons of Canaan," said Pharaoh. "It is for this reason that I ordered slain all Canaanite males throughout the land. Yet even after this stratagem of ethnic cleansing was a success, the wombs of my daughters remain rocky. Wherefore hast thou plagued upon me thus?"

For a second time, Aaron stood in bafflement as Pharaoh, and all his courtiers, viziers, and astronomers, acted as though they heard speech emanate from the Sphinx, while he did not.

Pharaoh grew ashen and turned abruptly, looking directly at Aaron. The expression thereon made Aaron afraid to look upon the face of Pharaoh. But as he averted his eyes, Pharaoh said, "What is your answer?"

And Aaron, filled suddenly with more of the spirit of God than ever before, glanced at Pharaoh, gesturing with his head toward the Sphinx, and said: "O master, the Sphinx still speaks."

Pharaoh turned back unto the Sphinx, regarding it with intensity that soon gave way to exasperation. He turned again unto Aaron, saying: "The Sphinx yet keeps his peace, awaiting your answer."

Said Aaron: “O master, the Sphinx doth sayest different utterances unto thee as unto me. For even now do I hear his speech continuously, despite thy reports of silence; but yea, the utterances you do report differ from the ones I hear.”

Pharaoh turned again and validated that, in his ears, the Sphinx continued its silence. Then he turned to Aaron and said, “Alerteth me when he has fallen silent in your ears.”

“He hath,” said Aaron at once.

“Come then, boy, go to, and join me now at my side, and we shall have a salon with the Sphinx.”

Aaron broke from the line of Pharaoh’s courtiers, viziers, and astronomers, and began to walk upon the sands to where Pharaoh stood.

“Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place where thou standest is holy ground,” said Pharaoh. Aaron did as he was bid.

Said Pharaoh, once Aaron was by his side: “We shall take turns speaking unto the Sphinx, and when the Sphinx responds to me, I shall say his words again unto you, as you shall say his words again unto me.”

Pharaoh said unto the Sphinx: “More and more Canaanites and Israelites pour into our lands from the north, despite my having slaughtered their males lo those many years ago. They have been tempted and seduced by the bounty and tranquility of Our Divine Lady The Nile. Should I put them again to the khopesh?”

Pharaoh listened intently, and then said unto Aaron, “Here now are the words of the Sphinx spoken to me: ‘Appeareth unto thee a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and thou lookest, and behold, the bush burns with fire, yet the bush is not consumed.’”

Pharaoh looked at Aaron and said unto him, “I will now turn aside, and see this great sight.” And he cast his gaze hither and thither, until his gaze halted in a direction, and his eyes widened. For in his sight there appeared a bush, burning with varicolored fire, as though adorned with a coat of many colors.

Said Pharaoh unto his courtiers and viziers and astronomers: “Why is the bush not burnt?”

And Aaron turned to look where he saw Pharaoh’s gaze was directed, and saw nothing but sand; yet when he turned to the courtiers and viziers and astronomers, he saw them all enthralled and filled with wonder, looking at the spot where Pharaoh’s gaze was directed, murmuring unto one another, “Why is the bush not burnt?”

Aaron was filled with the spirit of God and turned to Pharaoh, saying: “Here now are the words of the Sphinx spoken to me: ‘I surely have seen the affliction of the Canaanites which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows. Yet I

shall deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.'"

Pharaoh was uncertain. It sounded as though the Sphinx were promising to rid him of the Canaanite immigrants without any effort on Pharaoh's part. But this news was warped and distorted by the vision of the burning bush, which was eerie and miraculous. This salon with the Sphinx was a denser juxtaposition of novelty than any he had perceived before.

Yet Aaron continued to speak, turning to face the Sphinx, saying unto it: "The bush has been given a coat of pitch, just as woven baskets of reed are given a coat of pitch so they might float on the waters. The bush is like unto a pitched basket, which our granarymen use to float grain down the mighty Nile, unto the herdsmen below who feed the grain to their livestock. Just as a coat of pitch enables the woven basket of reed to keep safe any living thing placed within it, so that it might grow despite the deadly waters all around it, so does a coat of pitch enable the bush to live and grow despite the deadly fire all around it. The burning bush wears its coat of pitch as a coat of many colors, comfortable and exalted within."

And Aaron continued to gaze not upon the imaginary burning bush, but upon the countenance of the Sphinx, and feigned surprise in silence. Then turned he to Pharaoh and said: "Here now are the words of the Sphinx spoken to me: 'Yes. Pharaoh must find his coat of pitch, so that the flames to come shall consume him not.'"

Pharaoh attempted to prolong the discourse, but the Sphinx fell silent in both his and Aaron's ears. They placed their shoes back on their feet and rejoined Pharaoh's courtiers, viziers, and astronomers.

CHAPTER 7

When they returned to the palace, Pharaoh called for Joseph, his chief vizier. Joseph stood before the throne as Aaron sat at his spot to Pharaoh's right.

"You need a name, boy," said Pharaoh unto Aaron. Pharaoh still thought Aaron's name was "I Am."

"Yes, O master," said Aaron.

"What say you to the name Joseph?"

Aaron considered. Then: "Joseph is a fine name, O master."

"The only problem is that this man who stands before us, who claims to be the greatest of my viziers, yet who tendeth fields of wisdom with one-tenth the yield of yours, is also named Joseph. For lo, what would you do, boy, if you were Pharaoh? Would you keep the Joseph whose herd of wisdom encompasseth only seven lean kine, or install a new Joseph whose herd of wisdom encompasseth seven fatfleshed kine?"

Joseph was afraid.

Aaron said unto Pharaoh: "Lean kine have more incentive to swallow up the fatfleshed kine, whereas the fatfleshed kine are peaceable and satisfied in their field."

Pharaoh handed Aaron a dagger and said unto him: "Put now to the blade this Joseph before you, and you shall have his name and title."

Aaron sprang to his feet, ran to where Joseph stood, and drove the dagger into the chief vizier's throat. Joseph bled and staggered and died. Aaron prostrated himself before Pharaoh's throne and offered the dagger back to him.

"Rise, Joseph, chief of Pharaoh's viziers," said Pharaoh. "And keepest thou thy blade which I hath given thee."

Joseph the Levite scion, named as Aaron at birth, said, "O master, I rejoice in gratitude at thy favor."

"Very well," said Pharaoh, who was impatient with such courtly displays. "Cleanest now thy blade, and then ride thine own litter, upon the backs of thine own slaves, unto thine own plantation, wherein thou mayest dwell until the end of your days. But remember, Joseph: always keep clean thy blade. It must be clean at all times, yea, even immediately after use."

Joseph the Levite did as he was bid, restoring his blade to its original gleam, while house slaves of Pharaoh's disposed of the original Joseph's body.

The next day, Pharaoh called upon him at his new plantation and said: “Joseph, I shall tell you now what exchange I had with the Sphinx, lo those many years ago.” And Pharaoh told Joseph his plan to secure his throne to his bloodline by joining with his daughters, and the rejoinder thereunto from both the Sphinx and Pythia: “Any father who joins with any of his daughters in the land of Egypt shall be drawn down into the waters unto death, and the sons of Canaan shall inherit the daughters of Egypt.”

And Joseph, upon hearing of sons of Canaan inheriting daughters of Egypt, thought at once of Zipporah, and sighed. For he knew then that he was in love with Zipporah, and wanted nothing more than to make Pharaoh’s oracular injunction come true. An entire stratagem was thrust into his awareness all at once: and for the first time he had a glimpse of what he imagined the Egyptians experienced when beset by one of Pharaoh’s strikes. And when he asked himself what entity was the ultimate author of this stratagem, of this plague, a still small voice within whispered unto him: “I Am.”

Said Joseph the Levite: “O master, even when you slew all sons of Canaan and began joining with your daughters, they have failed to produce you heirs. Yet I think not that this is because all twelve of their wombs are hardscrabble.”

“I have actually joined only with seven of them so far,” said Pharaoh.

“Yes, O master,” said Joseph the Levite. His heart gladdened at the news that Zipporah might still be a virgin. “I think the problem lies not with the manner in which you plough your field, nor the eagerness of the Canaanites to seize your field. I think rather the problem lies with the location of your field.”

“Why say you this?” asked Pharaoh.

“The oracles said ‘any father who joins with any of his daughters in the land of Egypt.’ It is not specific to you, O master, nor your daughters. But it *is* specific to the land in which the joinings take place. We must hie thee to a foreign land, still near unto Egypt, but far enough from it that even an oracle could not quibble over its distinctness. Only in such a land will your daughters’ wombs turn from hardscrabble to dark soil.”

Pharaoh considered. “I cannot leave Egypt without my entire nation following me. My every word and deed doth govern them. If I leave, they shall follow, e’en if I order them to stay on pain of death.”

“I see the truth of this, O master,” said Joseph. “But I have a stratagem to allow you to leave Egypt with your daughters, go to unto some other land, and dwell there long enough to plant your seed in their fields, and harvest what sons you can, before then returning to your throne here in Egypt.”

“I would hear this stratagem,” said Pharaoh.

“I ask one thing in return,” said Joseph.

“Name it,” said Pharaoh.

“Zipporah,” said Joseph.

“I see,” said Pharaoh. “Thy mother?”

“You made her the mother to the boy ‘I Am,’ not the mother of the man now before you: Joseph, chief vizier unto Pharaoh,” said the Levite scion.

Pharaoh said unto him: “Thou speakest truth once again. Zipporah is still a virgin. You may enter into betrothal with her now, but you may not consummate your marriage unto her until after my first planting in one of her sisters has taken root.”

“Thank you, O master,” said Joseph.

“Tell me now of this stratagem,” said Pharaoh.

And Joseph did.

CHAPTER 8

Ten days later, Joseph went to Zipporah's plantation and called upon Jochebed, whom he had not seen in years. She wept with joy to see him, but Joseph's heart was hardened by her fawnery.

"In the days since you spirited me into Zipporah's well, once again hath Israelites from the land of Canaan journeyed unto Egypt," said Joseph. "Know you now their leaders? Hast thou discourse with their number?"

"O my son, I know a prominent Israelite named Joshua, that settled here with his wives ten years ago," said Jochebed.

"Of what tribe is this Joshua?"

"Ephraim," said she.

"Knowest thou any Levite men?" asked Joseph.

"I know one named Aaron," said Jochebed, with play in her heart. "Son of Amram."

"Speak not those names to me," said Joseph unto her. "Ever. Those men are dead."

"O my son!" said Jochebed, wailing and gnashing her teeth. "I cannot abide such words from thee! For I am thy mother, thy one true mother, whose womb cradled thee for nine months before could her arms."

"What words wouldst thou bid me say, woman? Yes, mother of my blood, mother of my flesh, thou art. But mother of my mind? Mother of my spirit? Of my heart? Verily I say unto thee, nay, thy brutish temple bears no such diadem. Lo, thy womb! Yes, cradle me it did – before it spat me out and cast me unto the bottom of a well. Your womb is all of you that has use. You are nothing but a womb with limbs."

Oh, how Jochebed's heart was cast low by Joseph's anger! Lo, his anger and resentment and hurt! In his rage, these urns of bile and vessels of pain he stocked in his breast seemed to him to be fuller than the corresponding urns and vessels stocked within hers. He noticed not that his words ran rampant upon Jochebed's heart with the same brazen potency as the words of a strike, spoken by Pharaoh, did run rampant upon his victims' perceptions. He had handled her urns and vessels carelessly, and in the process shattered them unto dust.

Jochebed said: "Stay with me awhile, O my son. I care not who answers the call 'oh come, my son.' If Joseph the chief vizier of Egypt answers, it shall gladden my heart. If Aaron the Levite scion answers, it shall gladden my heart. So long as someone, anyone, answers the call 'oh come, my son,' it shall gladden my heart."

And Joseph, who was filled with the spirit of God, kept his peace.

Jochebed began to weep. “O my son, do you not remember when I used to suckle you upon my breast? My voice cooing softly in your ears? My warmth on your skin? My scent in your nostrils? My taste in your mouth? You could lie here with me for a spell. You might wish to suckle again now as you did then. Or I could be suckled upon you.”

“Thou art only a sheketz, unto whom I now turn the other cheek. Good evening, housemarm of Zipporah! Zipporah: the shiksa who presideth over my heart,” said Joseph, and went to. He and Jochebed never set eye on one another again.

CHAPTER 9

Ten days later, Joseph summoned Zipporah, who traveled to his plantation on her litter, atop the backs of her slaves. “I hear I am to call you by a different name now, O chief vizier,” said she, with play in her heart.

Said he, “Yes. I am Joseph now. Heard you this from Pharaoh?”

Zipporah replied, “Nay, but from Jochebed.”

Joseph said: “What else hath sprung from the mouth of Jochebed?”

Said Zipporah: “Jochebed says thy heart has been hardened, and thy spirit has grown cold.”

Joseph laughed a laugh without joy and said unto Zipporah, “Verily, her ears must be those of grain, for she hath heard my words without taking their full meaning.”

Said Zipporah: “What is their full meaning?”

Joseph replied, “My heart has been hardened against *her*. My spirit has grown cold toward *her*. But my spirit unto itself burneth hot like fire, like the coat of many colors the Sphinx draped over the bush he plagued into Pharaoh’s sight, and whose existence I referenced in the winning over of thy father. And as for being hardened, Jochebed is the only one for whom my heart is that part. For you, my love, that part is another.”

Zipporah sprang to her feet and spake unto Joseph: “‘My love’? Why sayest thou so?”

Said Joseph: “I have asked your father for your hand in marriage, and he hath given it.”

Zipporah was uncertain. “Aaron... I mean Joseph. You are but fifteen years old.”

Joseph said, “The youngest chief vizier ever in service to any pharaoh.”

Said Zipporah, “Thou misconstrue. You cut an imposing figure indeed, Joseph, and even before your divination career, I knew you to be wise beyond your years. But not so far beyond your years as are mine, which surpass yours by a decade. A boy is still how I think of thee.”

Joseph smiled and said, “Then I shalt give thee all the time thou might need to accommodate thy thinking to the notion. For you are now saved from Pharaoh’s advances.”

Zipporah suddenly understood what being betrothed to Joseph would mean for her. It meant a permanent departure from a territory of relentless anxiety. She suddenly came to see Joseph as her liberator from the foul, incestuous schemes of her father. And this revelation within her heart triggered an upwelling of love for the boy, whom she had called Aaron, even though as a man were he called Joseph. She cared not now what he ought be called, nor that he had once been the child she had succored and shielded. She saw only the most eligible bachelor she had ever met,

one of the most striking and powerful men in all Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, that father of hers who cared nothing for the souls of men, and even less for those of women.

Said Zipporah: “Come, dear Joseph, lie here with me for a spell. I shall fill thine ears with soft murmurs and sweet song. I shall fill thy skin with my warmth and your nostrils with my scent. You have but ask and my breast shall be yours to suckle. Shall I fill your mouth with my taste? For yea, your mouth can be filled, or verily, can also mine.”

And Joseph was overjoyed at Zipporah’s gladdened heart, and that its gladness was true. And, lo!, Joseph and Zipporah joined with one another, in true love of the heart, and in profane matrimony of the flesh.

CHAPTER 10

Ten days later, Joseph summoned Joshua, scion of the tribe of Ephraim, to his plantation. Joshua knew not the purpose of his call, and met Joseph afraid.

“O chief of Pharaoh’s viziers, how may I serve thee?” said Joshua.

“Well met, Joshua of the Canaanites,” said Joseph unto him. “Knowest thou any of my history or provenance?”

“Nay, master,” said Joshua.

“What I speak unto thee now shall forever remain lodged in thine ears, never to find themselves near your mouth,” commanded Joseph.

“Yes, master,” said Joshua.

“Swear it now, before me, upon your ancestors, upon Jacob, upon Isaac, upon Abraham, yea, even upon Abel and Adam, that my words shall forever remain lodged in thine ears, never to find themselves near your mouth,” commanded Joseph.

“O master, I do swear it, upon Jacob, and Isaac, and Abraham, and Abel, and Adam himself, the First Man,” said Joshua.

“Very well,” said Joseph, who then bade his servants and guards leave. The two Canaanites were alone.

“I am the chief of Pharaoh’s viziers, a title earned through honest toil and meritorious efforts,” said Joseph, “which are things Pharaoh sees and knows. But I tell you now another thing, which Pharaoh seest not and knowest not. For no Egyptian blood runneth through my veins. Verily I say unto thee, the blood of Israel runs through my veins. I am a descendant of Jacob, and Isaac, and Abraham, and Abel, and Adam himself the First Man, just as thou art.”

Joshua was struck dumb at this revelation.

Continued Joseph: “I intend to subvert Pharaoh’s will, and lead the nation of Israel out of its bondage within Egypt. And I call upon thine aid in this stratagem.”

Joshua prostrated himself before Joseph, weeping with joy, saying: “O master, how may I serve thee?”

“That shall be revealed in time,” said Joseph. “For now, I need only that thou discloseth unto me what members of the tribe of Levi whom you may know to dwell in Egypt, so that I might speak unto them. For I am descended from Levi, and long hath I lived apart from my kinsmen, and mightily do I sigh and wish for a redemption thereunto.”

“O master, there are some Levites in the land of Egypt, numbering three thousand. But many tens of thousands of Israelites of other lineages doth dwell hereabout,” replied Joshua.

“Knowest thou what patriarch presideth over this Levite band?” asked Joseph.

“Korah,” replied Joshua, “Korah the Levite.”

CHAPTER 11

Ten days later, Joseph summoned Korah, patriarch of those tribesmen of Levi that dwelt in Egypt, to his plantation. Korah knew not the purpose of his call, and met Joseph afraid.

“O chief of Pharaoh’s viziers, how may I serve thee?” said Korah.

“Well met, Korah of the Canaanites,” said Joseph unto him. "Knowest thou any of my history or provenance?”

“Nay, master,” said Korah.

“What I speak unto thee now shall forever remain lodged in thine ears, never to find themselves near your mouth,” commanded Joseph.

“Yes, master,” said Korah.

“Swear it now, before me, upon your ancestors, upon Jacob, upon Isaac, upon Abraham, yea, even upon Abel and Adam, that my words shall forever remain lodged in thine ears, never to find themselves near your mouth,” commanded Joseph.

“O master, I do swear it, upon Jacob, and Isaac, and Abraham, and Abel, and Adam,” said Korah.

“Very well,” said Joseph, who then bade his servants and guards leave. The two Canaanites were alone.

“I am the chief of Pharaoh’s viziers, a title earned through honest toil and meritorious efforts,” said Joseph, “which are things Pharaoh sees and knows. But I tell you now another thing, which Pharaoh seest not and knoweth not. For no Egyptian blood runneth through my veins. Verily I say unto thee, the blood of Israel runs through my veins. I am a descendant of Jacob, and Isaac, and Abraham, and Abel, and Adam himself the First Man, just as thou art.”

Korah was struck dumb at this revelation.

Continued Joseph: “I intend to subvert Pharaoh’s will, and lead the nation of Israel out of its bondage within Egypt. And I call upon thine aid in this stratagem.”

Korah listened carefully and thought long before saying unto Joseph: “Whose lineage of Israel dost thou claim?”

“Levi,” said Joseph.

“The Levites of Egypt are my flock,” said Korah.

“Indeed,” said Joseph.

“O chief vizier, thou art indeed my master when it comes to the will of Pharaoh, but as a fellow Israelite you surely understand that I must needs serve a second, higher, master, when it comes to the safety and cleanliness of my flock, the Egyptian Levites,” said Korah, with some trembling.

“Of course,” replied Joseph. “Render unto Pharaoh the things that are Pharaoh’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”

“Yes, O master, you take my meaning exceedingly well. I hope then for your grace and forbearance as I interview thee regarding thy knowledge of God,” said Korah.

“Proceed,” said Joseph.

Said Korah unto Joseph: “Does a tallit made entirely of techelet need fringes?”

“Yes,” answered Joseph at once.

Korah was troubled, and spake thus: “The blue color of the ṭallit does not make it ritually correct, yet according to your statement four blue threads do so.”

Joseph said nothing, and seemed at peace.

Korah then said: “Does a house filled with the books of the Law need a mezuzah?”

“Yes,” answered Joseph at once.

Korah’s unease grew. Said he: “The presence of the whole Torah, which contains 175 chapters, does not make a house fit for habitation, yet you say that one chapter of it does so.”

And Joseph replied: “O Korah, I surely have seen the affliction of the Canaanites which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows. Yet I shall deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Replied Korah: “Yes, O master, so you have said. But it would take an exceedingly great sea of milk and of honey to rival the wealth that hath Levi’s seed accumulated here amid the Nile. For it would take 300 mules to carry all the gold, and frankincense, and myrrh, that my flock holdeth here. And while I regard you as a truthful and honorable man, your answers in my interview hath weakened my faith that thou art truly the Levite scion.”

Joseph said: “My mother bore me during the reign of terror years ago in which Pharaoh put all Egyptian Canaanite males to the khopesh. I was hidden as an infant in a pitched basket and left bobbing by the banks of the Nile for years while my mother tended me in secret. When I became a man, my talents for divination caught Pharaoh’s eye. But I swear to you, no Egyptian blood flows through my veins. I am a thing of God’s that should have been rendered unto God, but a twist of fate hath instead rendered me unto Pharaoh.”

Korah considered Joseph's words. Then said he: "Art thou even circumcised?"

"I am not," replied Joseph, who was filled with the spirit of God, and stifled his anger.

"I am grateful for our meeting today, O chief vizier, but must now take my leave," said Korah.

"Very well," said Joseph.

"I shall honor my oath of silence, O chief vizier, given this day," said Korah.

"Indeed," said Joseph, "lest your gold, and frankincense, and myrrh, so heavy as to sprawl across the backs of 300 mules, are to be rendered unto Pharaoh after all, and not unto the god whose minutiae you guard so jealously."

And Korah departed.

CHAPTER 12

Ten days later, Joseph summoned Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard, to his plantation. Potiphar knew not the purpose of his call, and met Joseph afraid.

"O chief of Pharaoh's viziers, how may I serve thee?" asked Potiphar.

"Well met, Potiphar," said Joseph. "Knowest thou any of my responsibilities unto Pharaoh?"

"A little, master," said Potiphar. "Thou dost divine for him his future from the utterances of the Sphinx, and from other sources."

"True, so far as it goeth," replied Joseph. "But now what I speak unto thee shall forever remain lodged in thine ears, never to find themselves near your mouth."

"Yes, master," said Potiphar.

"Swear it now, before me, upon your ancestors, upon Pharaoh, upon all Pharaoh's ancestors, upon Semenre, upon Khanubi, upon Thutmose, upon Amenhotep, upon Merdjefare, that my words shall forever remain lodged in thine ears, never to find themselves near your mouth," commanded Joseph.

"O master, I do swear it, upon Semenre, upon Khanubi, upon Thutmose, upon Amenhotep, upon Merdjefare," said Potiphar.

"Very well," said Joseph, who then bade his servants and guards leave. The two servants of Pharaoh were alone.

"Knowest thou the boundaries and barriers, yea, the trials and tribulations, that the Sphinx and his Hellenic whore, Pythia, hath set between our Pharaoh and his goal of securing his throne unto his bloodline," said Joseph.

"Yes, O master," replied Potiphar. "I know these boundaries have greatly troubled our Pharaoh."

Continued Joseph: "I intend to subvert the will of Pythia and the Sphinx, and lead the empire of Egypt out of its bondage within the sight of these evil oracles. And I call upon thine aid in this stratagem."

Potiphar prostrated himself before Joseph, weeping with joy, saying: "O master, how may I serve thee?"

"That shall be revealed in time," said Joseph. "For now, I need only that thou ready thy guardsmen for action. Lo, let every guardsman of Pharaoh sharpen his khopesh, and polish it to a gleam, and do so repeatedly and often, and in public places, especially in sight of the Canaanites who infest this land. But! Makest thou and thine sure to know, their blades are not yet to spill blood – only to be seen readying for such."

CHAPTER 13

Ten days later, Joshua called upon Joseph at his plantation.

“Well met, Joshua, scion of Ephraim,” said Joseph. “How may I serve thee?”

“O master, my people, the people of Ephraim, but even also all the nations of Israel that dwell in Egypt, are afraid, and tremble,” said Joshua.

Joseph spake with anger: “Who hath so terrified the blood of my blood, the Canaanites that have descended upon Egypt to dwell peaceably therein?”

“The guardsmen of Pharaoh,” replied Joshua. “For loiter amid our streets and dwellings they do, openly displaying their wicked blades, endlessly sharpening them and polishing them before us.”

Replied Joseph: “But their blades strike no Israelite flesh?”

“Nay, O master,” said Joshua. “They keep their peace, but flaunt their armaments in the faces of those with most cause to fear them, verily, the faces of our wives, of our children, of all the fruit of all the loins of Israel.”

Joseph sat back in his throne, a troubled expression on his countenance. “I am on good terms with Potiphar,” said he. “I will speak with him and divine his intent, and Pharaoh’s.”

Joshua prostrated himself before Joseph and wept with joy. But he stopped when Joseph continued: “But, Potiphar is a headstrong, capricious man, whose loyalties lie only with Pharaoh, none other. Pharaoh trusts me with some matters of his, but not all. There is a chance that if a slaughter is to come, nothing I say to either man will stay it.”

“O master, what would you have us do?” asked Joshua.

Said Joseph: “Pharaoh ordered the slaughter of Canaanite males once before, lo those many years ago. This action was a success for him because it came without warning. Consider the sight of these guardsmen, flaunting their khopeshes, as a sign, lo, as an omen, of a possible slaughter to come. In which case, make use of your warning! Make haste, and flee the land of Egypt! Hie thee eastward, across the Red Sea, to the plains of Midian, wherein distant cousins of yours and mine live and operate their own kingdom. Prevail upon their hospitality and give Pharaoh’s angel of death the time it needs to pass over you and yours.”

“This I shall do, yea, ready my wives and children and asses and mules and precious metals, and depart in haste for Midian,” said Joshua.

“Very well,” said Joseph. “But mind ye also, spread the word beyond just the tribe of Ephraim. For yea, we can only assume that all the necks of Israel lieth outstretched upon Pharaoh’s chopping block. To spare one at the expense of another is to expend the world entire.”

“This I shall do, O master,” said Joshua.

“Start with the Levites first,” commanded Joseph.

“Yes, O master,” said Joshua, and took his leave, and did as he was bid.

CHAPTER 14

Ten days later, Korah called upon Joseph at his plantation.

“Your master readies a slaughter against us, the people of Israel, whose blood you claim to share,” said Korah in anger, “and your only intercession is to advise us to flee? Flee to Midian, of all places?”

“Well met, Korah,” said Joseph. “I have news that will gladden your heart. I hath just met with Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh’s guard, and learnt of Pharaoh’s true intent. For he does intend a slaughter, but not of any of Canaan or Israel. He seeks to eliminate the Hyksos, those foreigners who hail from the west and the south, from Libya and Nubia. He careth not for the blood of our people.”

“That gladdens my heart to hear,” said Korah cautiously, “but what guarantee have we that his blades will strike only his intended targets? For Potiphar’s men are bloodthirsty, and berserk, and are likely to sweep the heads and hands and feet of Israel beneath the rug of collateral damage, once loosed.”

“That was the specific subject of my discussion with Potiphar,” said Joseph. “He hath allowed me to plead the case of Israel and agreed to a condition. He will instruct his men to pass over any house of Egypt with a smear of lamb’s blood above the doorway. He bade me notify the Israelites of Egypt to place this mark upon their houses in ten days’ time.”

“I shall do this thing, and pass word unto my fellow Israelites that they should also,” said Korah.

“Good,” replied Joseph. “But be wary! Pass on this word only to the Levites. Potiphar fears that if each tribe of Israel passes word unto one another, rather than within one another, then shall the Hyksos learn of the plot, and all will be lost. Over the next ten days shall I summon each of the other tribes’ patriarchs, and say unto them what I have said unto thee.”

“I shall direct only my fellow Levites to smear lamb’s blood above their doors,” said Korah.

“Good,” said Joseph.

“Thank you, O master, for your benevolent intercession,” said Korah.

“Very well,” replied Joseph, and Korah took his leave, and did as he was bid.

CHAPTER 15

The next day, Joseph summoned Zipporah, his betrothed, to his plantation.

“O master of my heart, how may I serve thee?” said she.

“I hath written a song,” said Joseph, “the Song of the Sea. I hath graven it here on this stone tablet. Learn it well, Zipporah, yea, commit it unto thy memory in its fullness. Omit no word and elide no syllable. And once the Song of the Sea hath taken up residence in thy mind, destroyest thou this stone tablet which bears it.”

“This I shall do, O master of my heart,” replied Zipporah. “But why? Where shall I perform this song?”

“Thou shalt not perform it solo,” said Joseph. “Once thou hast committed it unto thy memory, shalt thou teach it unto all eleven of your sisters, yea, all of Pharaoh’s daughters shall know it verbatim, and be able to perform it in unison upon command.”

“This I shall do, O master of my heart,” replied Zipporah. “But to what end?”

“That shall be revealed in time,” replied Joseph.

“Very well, O master of my heart,” said she, and took her leave, and the stone tablet with her, and did as she was bid.

CHAPTER 16

Nine days later, Joseph summoned Potiphar to his plantation.

“O chief vizier, how may I serve thee?” asked Potiphar.

“Tonight is the night,” said Joseph unto Potiphar. “All thy guardsmen and all their blades are to be loosed upon the houses of Levi. You are to slaughter all their men, and all their boys, and all their women, leaving only their girls alive. And then art thou to burn their houses to the ground, and round up all their girls, and mules and asses, and gold and frankincense and myrrh, and hie the lot unto the storehouses of Ephraim, all under cover of a single night – this night.”

“O master, so shall I do,” answered Potiphar. “But how shall my guardsmen and I know which are the houses of Levi?”

“The houses you seek have been marked with a smear of lamb’s blood above their doors,” said Joseph. “Seek ye no further than the houses already bloodied, and pass over the rest with strictest discipline.”

And it came to pass that night fell, and as Joseph retired to his balcony overlooking Egypt, he began to hear the screams and wails of the Levites, and see the flames of their houses as they burned down to nothing. He wanted to sing and dance and clap his hands in merriment, to make a joyful noise, but was filled with the spirit of God, and kept his peace. For he had known all along that Pharaoh and he shared a single predicament – they needed the freedom to join with the daughters of their line in order to guarantee and magnify the power of their own seed within that line.

To do otherwise would be to capitulate to an existential threat.

After that night, the tribe of Levi consisted of 300 females and one male, all below the age of twenty.

Stood Joseph upon his balcony, thinking these thoughts of glory and greatness, as unto God, when a furious pounding arose from his door. He went to see who had called upon him, and saw that it was Joshua.

“Joshua, enter at once,” said Joseph, stepping out the doorway to look up the street and down, as in caution. Joshua did as he was bid and spake:

“O master, the Levites have been slain! Their houses burned, their property seized, woe, woe, e’en their wives hath been put to the khopesh! Only the young girls yet live, and have been spirited away, along with their asses and mules, their gold and frankincense and myrrh, unto I know not where.”

Joseph displayed fear and spake: “We must flee! For the Levites were the most successful merchants of all the Egyptian Israelites, the child favored by the Nile with the most time to

suckle at her breast. If Pharaoh hath seen a vision, or misunderstood some utterance of the Sphinx, or otherwise got some evil notion in his head, making him hate the Levites most of all among all Israelites, then surely all other Israelites are in danger. I shall join you, Joseph, for we must flee to Midian this night! Hast thou made preparations for travel, as I advised thee?"

And Joshua replied, "Yes, O master, a mighty caravan of all the nations of Israel that dwelleth in Egypt, other than the Levites, has already begun to quit the city. We may catch up with them yet."

And Joseph left his plantation, and went with Joshua unto the caravan, and joined its eastward crawl, until all the Israelites that had dwelt in Egypt now dwelt in Midian.

CHAPTER 17

One day, Zipporah called upon Pharaoh in his palace. “Where is Joseph?” she asked.

“He is out of the country on business,” replied Pharaoh.

Said Zipporah, “When shall he return?”

“When his business is finished,” said Pharaoh.

And Zipporah took her leave, wary.

CHAPTER 18

Three months later, Potiphar called upon Pharaoh.

“O divine light, supreme ruler of all Egypt, I bring distressing news,” said Potiphar.

“Speak,” said Pharaoh.

“An army of Israelites approaches our eastern flank, near the flood plain of the Red Sea,” said Potiphar.

“In what numbers?” asked Pharaoh.

Said Potiphar: “Tens of thousands, O master. Perhaps hundreds of thousands.”

“I see,” said Pharaoh. “Have they a general?”

“Yes, O master, they have a general. It is Joseph, thy chief vizier, who disappeared on the night of Exodus,” said Potiphar.

Pharaoh bellowed in righteous anger and said: “Fetch now my daughters, and place them in a chariot with me, which ye shall drive. And fetch also my best officers, that they might ride in a separate chariot just behind me. And fetch also the rest of your guardsmen, yea, the entirety of my army, and array them behind us, as in a column, that we may all sally forth unto war.”

Potiphar took his leave and did as he was bid.

CHAPTER 19

At the eastern flank of Egypt, near the flood plain of the Red Sea, six hundred thousand Israelite soldiers were gathered in a line. At the other end of the flood plain approached the column of the Egyptian army, with Pharaoh's chariot first. There was an enclosed part of the chariot, to the rear, with slitted windows meant for archers. The chariot also had an open part, to the front, where Pharaoh sat up high, in sight of his officers and soldiers behind. Potiphar sat next to him, but down low, so he could whip the horses and drive the chariot. Mehreet, and Zipporah, and Zuleikah, and their nine sisters, huddled together in the rear of Pharaoh's chariot, out of sight, peering out at the flood plain of the Red Sea through the archers' slits.

As the column advanced into the center of the flood plain, the waters of the Red Sea within sight on either side, Pharaoh stood up on the bench of his chariot, spacing his feet wide to steady himself. He turned and faced his army, and shouted in a powerful voice: "I will pursue! I will overtake them! I will divide the spoils! I will gorge myself on them! I will draw my khopesh and my hand will destroy them!"

All eyes were on Pharaoh when he cried out thusly; all ears received his cries. But then his countenance changed from one of defiance and righteous anger to one of terror and wonder. And then: Lo! for he did scream.

And he leapt off the chariot, falling to the ground, and not moving.

Potiphar halted the chariot, and twisted round his form to gaze upon fallen Pharaoh.

From within the rear of the chariot, the sounds of women singing rang forth, loud and clear, as Zipporah and her eleven sisters began to sing the Song of the Sea, yea, exactly as Joseph had graven it upon the stone tablet at his plantation those many months ago:

I will sing to the Lord,
for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.
The Lord is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.
He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.
The Lord is a warrior;
the Lord is his name.
Pharaoh's chariots and his army
he has hurled into the sea.
The best of Pharaoh's officers
are drowned in the Red Sea.
The deep waters have covered them;
they sank to the depths like a stone.
Your right hand, Lord,

was majestic in power.
Your right hand, Lord,
shattered the enemy.
In the greatness of your majesty
you threw down those who opposed you.
You unleashed your burning anger;
it consumed them like stubble.
By the blast of your nostrils
the waters piled up.
The surging waters stood up like a wall;
the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea.
The enemy boasted,
"I will pursue, I will overtake them.
I will divide the spoils;
I will gorge myself on them.
I will draw my khopesh
and my hand will destroy them."
But you blew with your breath,
and the sea covered them.
They sank like lead
in the mighty waters.
Who among the gods
is like you, Lord?
Who is like you -
majestic in holiness,
awesome in glory,
working wonders?
You stretch out your right hand,
and the earth swallows your enemies.
In your unfailing love you will lead
the people you have redeemed.
In your strength you will guide them
to your holy dwelling.
The nations will hear and tremble;
anguish will grip the people of Philistia.
The chiefs of Edom will be terrified,
the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling,
The people of Canaan will melt away;
terror and dread will fall on them.
By the power of your arm
they will be as still as a stone -
Until your people pass by, Lord,
until the people you bought pass by.
You will bring them in and plant them
on the mountain of your inheritance -
The place, Lord, you made for your dwelling,

the sanctuary, Lord, your hands established.
The Lord reigns
for ever and ever.

While Pharaoh's daughters sang the Song of the Sea, Pharaoh came back to himself, and climbed surreptitiously back upon the bench of his chariot, where he lay low, at Potiphar's feet. And as soon as Pharaoh's daughters had finished the song, Potiphar lashed heavily upon the haunches of his horses, and they sprang forth in a great froth, racing the chariot across the flood plain of the Red Sea, yea, unto Joseph and his assembled army of Israelites.

"Hail, Potiphar," called Joseph unto the chariot, once it had stopped.

"Hail, Joseph," said Potiphar.

Pharaoh stood, standing beside Potiphar. "Hail, Joseph," said he.

"Hail," said Joseph. Then: "Look behind thee, to see what thou hast wrought."

All turned and saw, on the Egyptian side of the flood plain of the Red Sea, Pharaoh's army, and his best officers, writhing in agony and fear. They wailed and gnashed their teeth and beat their fists upon their breasts, and rent their garments, and the officers' slave girls ululated in grief.

"It is as you had said," whispered Pharaoh unto Joseph, in amazement.

"Yes – for the Egyptian eye regards the Egyptian ear as its prime mover. Craft the right input to the Egyptian ear, and it shall inevitably compel the Egyptian eye to render it so, unto the Egyptian mind."

"Forgive me, O master," said Potiphar unto Joseph.

"Speak, O captain," said Joseph.

Potiphar spake, saying, "Sayest thou now in truth: the entire Egyptian army will return now unto the banks of the Nile, saying unto all they pass, lo, Pharaoh and his chariot and driver hath been swallowed up by the Red Sea, which rushed in abruptly to swell well above the flood plain, upon the command of the renegade Israelite general Joseph?"

"Yes, O captain," replied Joseph. "For that is indeed exactly what the Egyptian army perceived. Behold them, across the flood plain! Even now they see not their leader, nor e'en his chariot. The Red Sea herself sang unto them that these things were no more, so their sight apprehendeth them no more. For what greater authority stands ready to tell them otherwise? E'en Pharaoh shouting is no match for the singing sea."

"And note, O captain," said Pharaoh, "this strike Joseph hath composed for me forces to artificial completion that business started by Pythia and the Sphinx lo those many years ago. For now all of Egypt believes that I have been drawn down into the waters unto death. And the ears of the

Sphinx shall be among those ears in Egypt that shall hear of my demise, and thereby monitor my activity no more. And so shall it remain, against the day when my daughters' fields are planted with my seed, productive and abundant, and at least one male heir at last hath emerged from one among their wombs, and I am able to return unto Egypt – to be hailed as a god who hath defeated death itself!"

"O master," Joseph said unto Pharaoh, "thou shalt need a different name whilst thou travels beyond Egypt's borders."

Pharaoh thought for a moment. "Moses," said he, unto Joseph and Potiphar. "For Pharaoh is he who was drawn down into the waters unto death, whereas Moses shall be he who was drawn up from the waters unto life."

"I like it," said Joseph unto Moses. "I shall also adopt a new name – an Israelite name. Henceforth shall I be called Aaron."

This was the first time Moses-who-was-once-Pharaoh had ever heard Joseph referred to as Aaron, and said, "It is a good name. Aaron is better than I Am."

"It gladdens my heart to know it pleaseth thee," said Aaron-who-was-once-Joseph-who-was-once-I-Am-who-was-once-Aaron. "But all my names still apply. Once upon a time, I was simply I Am. But now I," said he, gesturing wide unto the spectacle of the flood plain of the Red Sea, and the vanquished horde thereon, "am *that* I Am."

Aaron and Moses turned to face the assembled Israelites. Aaron grasped Moses's hand in his, raising them both on high, and cried out unto his flock: "Nations of Israel! I present to you my friend, our august refugee: Moses!"

And Aaron and Moses embraced, and a riotous cheer went up from Potiphar, and the whole six hundred thousand Israelites arranged in a line along the eastern edge of the flood plain of the Red Sea, including Joshua, who was also in attendance, as Aaron's lieutenant. And verily did the crushed Egyptians hear the riotous cheering, and their morale broke, and they were routed, and made haste back to the banks of the Nile.

Zipporah and her sisters were still huddled in the rear of the chariot, but heard all that was spoken among the men. They wept quietly and clung to each other at the words of their father, and understood not how a man could be so wicked. Most men, they thought, given the opportunity to switch identities and cut ties with their pasts, would do so to *repudiate* the sin and wrongdoing that brought them to that point – but their father was switching identities solely because his love for his sin and wrongdoing was stronger than anything else in his heart.

Mehreet in particular grieved in silence, for she knew she would no longer be able to protect herself and her sisters from her father Moses's incestuous longings, since all qedeshu and all myrrh had been left behind in Egypt, forever beyond her grasp.

Zipporah in particular grieved in silence, for her heart was troubled, and the urns and vessels stocked within her breast were numerous and only partly filled. She loved Aaron, and was relieved that all could now use that name openly. But she hated her father, and disliked that Aaron was troubled not at all by the prospect of helping her father reach his wicked goal. She hated that Aaron's wisdom and eloquence had been so easily harnessed unto the aims of The Adversary.

CHAPTER 20

Between the time of the Exodus and that of the Song of the Sea, Joseph and Joshua led the Israelites unto the land of Midian, where Reuel, the victualer and hospitaler, presided.

Joseph had, in those frenzied early hours after all the houses of Israel other than the Levites had been passed over by Potiphar's men, directed Joshua to take into his custody and care all the Levite girls orphaned on that fateful night. Joshua had been touched by Joseph's insistence on this point, thinking it an act of compassion and generosity. But Joseph had looked upon the assembled Levite orphan girls and beheld only a field in which his seed would be planted, and from which a new generation of Levite sons would arise. He looked at the orphaned girls and felt no tug of loyalty to them as his kin, or as fellow Israelites, or even as children of God. He saw them only as a means to his own self-glorifying ends. He saw them as wombs with limbs.

After the time of the Song of the Sea, wherein Pharaoh died and was resurrected as Moses, Aaron led his flock south, into the Wilderness of Sin, to the base of Mount Horeb. There the assembled nations of Israel, numbering six hundred thousand, with their asses and mules, their gold and frankincense and myrrh, established an encampment.

Aaron sent Potiphar, who still drove the chariot with Moses's twelve daughters inside, on an errand.

Then Aaron and Moses stood at the center of this tent city, and Aaron spake unto the multitudes, saying:

"O nations of Israel, long hath we labored in exile from our homeland of Canaan. Yet hath we endured another exile of a different sort, one that would still afflict us even if I could transport us to Canaan posthaste, with the tap of a sorcerer's rod. For whatever the lands in which we hath worked faithfully and diligently to please and glorify the Lord Our God, hath we also felt separated from Him, denied immediate communion with Him, lacking any man to call our prophet. But the Lord Our God spoke to me in a dream, shewing unto me a man's face, and saying, Behold, in thy sight lies the countenance of the next prophet of Israel, as like unto the prophets of yore, of Jacob, of Isaac, yea, even of Abraham. And when I awoke from my dream I went about my normal labors for years, sighing not, seeking not, until seeing this prophet's countenance, hidden in plain sight. For I am not a prophet – nay! May the Lord Our God split open the earth and swallow me up for such a claim. Nay, I am merely a shepherd in service to the Lord Our God, seeking after the lone lamb that hath strayed from his flock, but without whom the flock may never be unified. And at long last hath I found our prophet, and you, nations of Israel, have helped me restoreth him unto our flock. For this man, Moses, *is* that stray prophet. With Moses in our midst, we shall live henceforth in the tangible presence of the Lord Our God."

A riotous chorus arose from the assembled multitudes. But Aaron bade them still, and continued:

"Moses hath been called by the Lord Our God to commune with Him, atop this here mountain, for forty days and forty nights. For Moses hath heard his call to prophecy, but has yet to redeem it. He needs be alone with the Lord Our God to receive any new commandments the nations of

Israel might needs hear. I shall go to with Moses, ascending also Mount Horeb, but keeping a safe distance. I shall continue as a good shepherd, watering and feeding our Lamb of God, watching over his safety, but interfering not with his communion. And when we return together, the words that pour forth from the mouth of Moses shall be as crisp and new upon my ears as they shall be upon yours."

A man in black robes with a face shrouded in shadow called unto Aaron from the multitude, saying, "Who then shall preside over our encampment in thine absence? Who shall judge and mediate over the petty squabbles bound to arise among a flock so large?"

"Joshua shall," said Aaron, and then continued, after a spell: "Dost this election satisfy thee?"

"Yes," said the man in black, although it did not truly. For he was Korah the Levite, who had examined Aaron's knowledge of the Lord back in Egypt, and had found it wanting, and had managed to escape, unbeknownst to Aaron, the persecution and slaughter rained down upon his house by the man who had then been known as Joseph.

"Very well," said Aaron, and he departed with Moses.

Oh, how arduous and lengthy was their climb! The rock was slick with rain, the winds furious, the lightning and thunder descending upon them without mercy. Snakes and scorpions nipped at their heels, and the hideous laughter of distant hyenas rang in their ears. Aaron and Moses became afraid.

And it came to pass that there was a great fissure in the mountain, and Moses was nearly cast into it by reason of his own treacherous footfalls, yea, and nearly was he swallowed up unto the earth through the maw of the mountain. But Aaron took hold of him and steadied him, and caught him up from the maw of the earth, and restoreth did his feet upon the path.

Verily was the mountain a trial, and a tribulation. But they persevered, and made it over to the far side of Mount Horeb, and were soon reunited with the chariot, and Potiphar its driver, and the twelve daughters of Moses its cargo, parked all together on the foothills directly opposite where the Israelites were camped.

"Hail, Potiphar," said Aaron. "Hie we now to Midian, unto the inn of Reuel." And Aaron and Moses climbed into the chariot, and Potiphar did as he was bid.

CHAPTER 21

At the heart of Midian, Reuel was well prepared for their coming, and gave unto them three rooms: one for Aaron, one for Moses, and one for Moses's twelve daughters. Potiphar slept on the bench of the chariot, but ere he retired, he made merry with Aaron and Moses in the great room. They drank wine from gilded goblets; and ate bread and mutton and pomegranate; and clapped their hands and made a joyful noise to the rhythms of Reuel's minstrels; and smoked opium and hashish, which Reuel had imported from the lands to the east held by Cyrus the Great; and leered and groped and lascived unto Reuel's many beautiful young dancing girls.

Then Potiphar bade them goodnight, and thanked Reuel for his merriments and hospitalities, and retired to the chariot. And Reuel bade his guests goodnight, and thanked them for their patronage, and retired to his suite. And Aaron and Moses were alone.

"So, Aaron, hast thou any notions of what subjects might merit discourse between us?" asked Moses.

"I do, Moses," replied Aaron. "Zipporah."

"Yes," said Moses. "Yes, you may consummate with her." Moses smiled. "For surely thou hast labored and toiled sufficient to make clear thy worthiness."

"Thank you, Moses," said Aaron.

"Thank you, Aaron," said Moses.

Proceedeth did they down the corridor to the other wing of the inn, where Moses's twelve daughters sat in captivity. His daughters had been peaceable, if weary, but lo, did they begin a great wailing and gnashing of teeth when heardest they in their ears the approaching footfalls of Aaron and Moses. For all the daughters knew that there was no longer any place to hide from, or any avenue of defense against, their father's hateful, all-consuming wickedness. Twelve sisters ululated their grief at the rapes and impregnations that impended upon them at the hands of their father. And only one sister felt guilt for knowing she was to be spared.

The door opened and Moses stood beneath its lintel, saying unto his daughters: "Zipporah."

Zipporah stood and walked unto Moses, interlacing her fingers with those of her outstretched sistren as she passed. "Forgive me," she said unto them, weeping. "Forgive me, forgive me."

"We forgive you," said Mehreet, "for you have naught else to do."

Graspeth did Moses unto Zipporah's arm, and compelled her into the arms of Aaron, standing in the hallway of the inn.

"Well met, O my love," said Aaron unto her.

The urns and vessels stocked within her breast were in disruption, and seethed. But Zipporah was filled with the spirit of God, and kept her peace. “Good evening, O master of my heart,” said she.

Aaron brought her in tow across the threshold of his chamber, and closed the door.

Moses turned again unto his remaining daughters and said: “Mehreet.”

Mehreet stood, and felt the tumult and upset afflicting the urns and vessels stocked with her breast. But she was filled with the spirit of God, and said unto her outstretched sistren: “Keepest thou thy peace, and carry thy burdens for as long as thou canst carry.”

Graspeth did Moses unto Mehreet’s arm, and compelled her into the hallway, and then closed firm the door to his daughters’ chamber.

In his chamber, Moses joined with his eldest daughter, ravishing her body, and plundering her beauty, and despoiling her heart. He laid waste unto the urns and vessels stocked within her breast. At the first she feared she would die, and at the last she feared she would not. But lo!, even at the instant where he announced the very planting of his seed, even when her suffering and misery were at their height, she was filled with the spirit of God, and kept her peace.

When his breath was restored unto him, Moses said to Mehreet: “Thou needst a different name in this land. A Canaanite name.”

Replied Mehreet: “Yes, O my father.”

Said Moses: “I favor Miriam. What say you?”

Replied Mehreet: “Yes, O my father.”

And henceforth Mehreet was called Miriam by all.

CHAPTER 22

In his chamber, Aaron joined with the youngest daughter of Moses, ravishing Zipporah's body, and plundering Zipporah's beauty. But she could not bring herself to despise him, even though bile did runneth over from inside its urn stocked in her breast.

When his breath was restored unto him, Aaron said to Zipporah: "O my love, thou needst a different name in this land. A Canaanite name."

Replied Zipporah: "Yes, O my husband."

Said Aaron: "I favor Elisheba. What say you?"

Replied Zipporah: "Yes, O my husband."

And henceforth Zipporah was called Elisheba by all.

By and by, Aaron rose, to fetch more wine and relieve himself. He took up his robe, but failed to tie its sash, anticipating solitude in the public spaces of Reuel's inn, it being deep into night. So it was that, when exited he his chamber, with his love Elisheba still lazing abed, he was startled to find Moses standing in the hallway.

Aaron uttered no cries, but looked at Moses in silence. Moses averted his eyes from Aaron and gazed upon Aaron's flagging staff.

"Enjoyest thee thy consummation?" said Moses.

"Yes, Moses," said Aaron, and closed his chamber door behind him. Within, Elisheba ceased her lazing and crept up to the door, placing one ear upon it to hear unto the hallway.

"Didst thou reach satisfaction in thy planting?" said Moses.

"Verily, I did," said Aaron.

"And did my youngest daughter pleaseth thee as unto thy hopes?" said Moses.

"Verily, I say unto thee, yes," said Aaron.

"Help me navigate a conundrum, then, O retired chief vizier emeritus of an exiled Pharaoh's court," said Moses. "For if tonight were truly the eve of thy consummation with my youngest daughter, wherefore art her blood not visible upon thy rod?"

Aaron was afraid, for he took Moses's meaning in full. For he had deflowered Elisheba long before this night, back when he was called Joseph, and thereby broken his covenant agreed upon with Moses. But Aaron was filled with the spirit of God, and said unto Moses: "Didst thou not

enjoin me, when I first took the name Joseph, to always keep clean my blade? Verily, said thee, thy blade must be kept clean at all times, yea, even immediately after use."

As Elisheba heard her husband speaketh thus unto Moses, she became afraid, and leapt up and returned abed. She cast about looking for a sharp instrument, and spied Aaron's dagger, verily, the one to which Aaron had just referred, given him by Moses back when he was called Pharaoh. And she murmured prayers and lamentations unto Isis, as she had been taught by the priests and priestesses of her temple in her girlhood, and pressed the dagger up into her vagina, to draw forth from it a sea of red, that it might stain the sheets of their bed.

Oh, suffering and torment! The entire world dimmed in her vision as agony of agonies passed through her. But her stratagem succeeded, and a sea of red burst forth and stained the sheets of the bed in which she lay.

"I shall see my daughter now," said Moses unto Aaron, and when Elisheba heard this, she hurled her husband's dagger under the bed and away from the sight of all, and, being filled now with the spirit of God, closed her eyes and feigned sleep.

"As thou dost wish," said Aaron unto Moses, and flung open the chamber door.

Moses entered, and saw his youngest daughter sleeping, amid stains of her blood. He bid her wake, saying, "O my daughter, stand ye now before me, that I might look upon thee."

Elisheba did as she was bid.

"O my love..." said Aaron softly unto Elisheba, noticing his dagger absent from its appointed place, and grasping at once upon her stratagem. For the first time, he became aware of the possibility that the content and arrangement of the urns and vessels stocked in the breast of another might be more compelling than those of his own.

Elisheba yawned and feigned drowsiness. "O my father, what troubles thee?" Then she noticed Aaron, and smiled upon him, and said, "O my love! Surely a bloody husband thou art to me."

Moses gazed upon his youngest daughter's bloodied vagina in silence. Then he said unto her, softly, "Go back to sleep, my little pomegranate."

As Moses went to, in return to his chamber, he stopped before Aaron and said unto him: "If ye truly wish to be the humble shepherd looking after his flock of exiled Canaanites, ye had best be circumcised, I think. Reuel employs a chirurgeon. I shall order it done tomorrow." And he returned to his chamber and slept.

Aaron entered his chamber, closing its door behind him, and leapt abed, curling himself around his wounded wife. "O my love, O my love," said he, and nothing else. "O my love, O my love."

“O master of my heart, I fear thee, but I cannot desist from my loving you,” said Elisheba, and wept softly. “No man hath shaken and stirred the urns and vessels stocked within my breast as vigorously and insistently as thee.”

“O my love,” replied Aaron. “Thy breast stocks urns and vessels?”

“The priests and priestesses of my youth, of Isis and Osiris, spake thus,” said Elisheba. “They used the old tongue, Enochian, which e’en they knew of little. Said they that every man and woman hath Urim and Thummim – urns and vessels – in which their humours and moods were kept. Enjoineth they never to forget or neglect that every individual carries their own stock of urns and vessels, within their breast, and the same circumstance can cause them to be poured forth differently from one person to another.”

“Urim and Thummim,” said Aaron. “Fascinating.”

Elisheba was still dissatisfied with her explanation. The Egyptian tongue, which they both spoke, as well as the tongues of Canaan, which she was only just starting to construe, had no words for a precise translation of the meaning intended by the priests and priestesses of her youth. Had she known English, she could have said “feelings” – but lo, Aaron would have had no antecedent for such an incantation.

CHAPTER 23

The next day, Reuel's chirurgeon, Jethro, circumcised Aaron, and supplied him with herbs and balms to nurse his staff back to health. "Ten days until thou again may take thy wife," said he unto Aaron.

As Aaron returned to his chamber, he heard the sounds of fornication from behind Moses's door, and wondered with which daughter Moses joined. But he paused not, and entered his own chamber, where his wounded wife lay, weak and afraid.

"O my love," said Aaron unto Elisheba, "My masculinity and your femininity have both been put to the blade. Share now with me these herbs and balms, delivered unto me by Jethro, that we might both soothe ourselves and convalesce together, against the day we may join again."

Elisheba was too weak to speak, but she opened her eyes and nodded at Aaron, and tendered a smile. And Aaron was gentle, and kind, and ministered to his wife, and murmured "O my love" whenever she made anguished noises. For ten days he applied a tiny proportion of Jethro's medicines, yea, one tenth only, to his rod, and gaveth unto Elisheba the nine-tenths portion for her wound.

During those same ten days, Moses joined with his ten remaining daughters, yea, the ten of his daughters that were neither Elisheba, with whom he would never join, nor Miriam, with whom he already had. And passeth did he each of those ten nights once again in the great room of Reuel's inn, making merry with him and Potiphar as they had on their first night, lo, sating every appetite with feasting, and wine, and slave girls, and song. But Aaron sought not their merriments, and remained in his chamber, resting and ministering Jethro's medicines unto himself and his wife. In each other's arms Aaron and Elisheba lay, for ten days and ten nights. And as their bodies healed, emergeth did a sort of intercourse among their various urns and vessels, with portions of one's bile mixed with portions of the other's joy, and the like, in accordance with the sort of exchange the priests and priestesses of Isis and Osiris had declared long ago as good.

On the eleventh night, Aaron appeared in the great room, and did interrupteth the merriments of Moses and Reuel and Potiphar.

"Hail, Aaron," said Moses.

"Hail, Moses, and Potiphar, and Reuel," said Aaron. Then spake he unto Reuel: "O exceeding hospitaler, hast thou stone tablets, and instruments for engraving thereupon?"

"I shall find these and secure them unto thee," said Reuel, and departed.

"Wherefore needst thou stone tablets, and engraver's tools?" asked Moses.

"O Moses," answered Aaron, "forget not that thou art now the prophet of the Lord Our God, the one god that towers o'er all others ever to emerge from Canaan, above Baphomet, above Baal,

above Maat. Whenst thou vanquisheth an oracle, as thou hast done with the Sphinx, and his Hellenic whore Pythia, thou becometh as like unto an oracle thyself. Oracles can engage in discourse, and speak among the peoples; but the Lord Our God hath not that option, and can express Himself only in the written word."

Moses said nothing.

"In the meantime, I shall bring some bread and mutton and pomegranate back to my chamber, for my wife and me to share," said Aaron, and did so, and departed. Moses and Potiphar watched him go.

"Thou canst take the Israelite out of Canaan, but canst thou never take Canaan out of the Israelite," remarked Potiphar. And his merriment with Moses resumed.

The next day, Aaron said unto Elisheba, "O my love, my rod hath healed. How fareth thy womb and its tabernacle?"

"O master of my heart, their mending is nigh," replied Elisheba. "Ten more days ere shall I receive thee in with eagerness."

"Very well," said Aaron. He looked upon the stone tablets of instruments of engraving rendered unto him by Reuel earlier that day. "For those ten days, I shall inscribe upon these stone tablets the new laws of the Lord Our God."

"How dost thou know these laws, if thou art merely His prophet? Or His shepherd, or hierophant, or psychopomp, or whatever nature of agent of His thou dost declare?" asked Elisheba.

Aaron smiled and replied unto her: "I know them not yet. But the examination of the innards and contents of my Urim and Thummim: these shall guide my hand."

On that day, graveth he: THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME.

On the next day, graveth he: THOU SHALT NOT BE COVETOUS OF MY PROPERTIES.

On the next day, graveth he: THOU SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD THY GOD IN VAIN.

On the next day, the fifteenth day of the forty, graveth not at all Aaron, but rather sat he in silent puzzlement.

"O my love," said Aaron unto Elisheba, "mayest thou have any inducements or promptings as to laws or strictures worthy of a divinity?"

Elisheba, whose color had begun to redeem, and whose vigor seemed on the wax, replied, "No laws or strictures reside a-ready upon my tongue, O master of my heart. But I shall submit the question to my dreams this night, and see what promptings arrive."

On the sixteenth day of the forty, Elisheba said unto Aaron, “O master of my heart, Isis and Osiris visited unto me last night in a dream, and laid at my feet the inducements and promptings ye asked after.”

Aaron took up his instruments of engraving and positioned himself before the stone tablets, saying, “Tell me now these inducements thou hast received.”

Spake she, and graveth he:

THOU SHALT NOT MURDER

THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY

THOU SHALT NOT STEAL

Verily, did Aaron gaze upon his stone tablets and saw that their engravings were good. Yet he noticed an asymmetry that troubled him.

“Canst thou think of one more?” said he unto Elisheba. “Six hath not the grandeur and majesty of the number seven, for seven is the number of mystery and divinity.”

Thought she for a moment, before saying: “How construest thee THOU SHALT HONOR THY FATHER AND MOTHER?”

Said Aaron: “Strange to hear of honor toward thy father emerge from thy mouth.” To which Elisheba replied, “Stranger still to hear of honor toward thy mother from thine.” And lo! did they laugh heartily, and make a joyful noise unto the strangeness of their circumstance. Then graveth Aaron the seventh commandment upon the stone tablet, and rested.

CHAPTER 24

And it came to pass that, on the thirty-sixth day, their stay at Reuel's inn at the heart of Midian concluded successfully. The wounds of Aaron and Elisheba were healed. Full were the bellies of the men, and high were their spirits. And full were the wombs of all twelve of Moses's daughters: eleven by the man they had once considered a father, and one by the man she had once considered a son. Enough time had passed for their menses to descend, yet descendeth they had not, proving all of Aaron's and Moses's fields had been planted with their seed. And yoketh did Potiphar once more the horses unto the chariot, and bade they farewell to Reuel and Jethro, and returned they to Mount Horeb, to reunite unto the Israelites.

They arrived at Mount Horeb under cover of darkness on the fortieth night, on the same slope as before, opposite the slope at which the Israelite encampment lay. Potiphar parked the chariot much higher on Mount Horeb than before, yea, nearly unto the summit, such that they could see the lamps and fires of the Israelites below.

At Aaron's command, Potiphar freed the horses from the chariot and saddled upon them all twelve of Moses's daughters. They and he rode the horses along a roundabout path back to the Israelite encampment, so that all of the Midian party could return under cover of darkness except Moses and Aaron, who would sleep the night in the chariot and return, triumphant with stone tablets, in the morning.

When Potiphar and the women entered the encampment, they were surprised doubly: for not only was the center of the Israelite tent city occupied by an enormous idol, of a calf made of gold; but from their vantage at the lowlands they, and all the Israelites, could spy a pillar of fire churning and roiling near the summit of Mount Horeb.

All the Israelites in the encampment murmured with fear at the sight. "Moses and Aaron hath been called upon by the Lord Our God," said they, and trembled. And they looked upon the idol they had built, which, early in the forty days and forty nights, had seemed like a welcome return of familiar notions of divinity, yet felt they now ashamed by it. They feared what consequence might be visited upon them by their hasty retreat from the Lord Their God, and wailed and gnashed their teeth.

Potiphar saw the golden calf and said unto himself, "This is something my lord will wish the news of." Ensureth did he that the twelve daughters of Moses were safe and situated, and then mounted he one of the chariot's horses and race back from the Israelite encampment up to the pillar of fire swirling atop Mount Horeb.

As he approached the summit, he saw that the pillar of fire was the burning chariot, whose burning he surmised had begun at the hand of Aaron. He continued and spied Aaron and Moses both, and informed them of the idolatrous recidivism underway at the encampment.

Aaron trembled with righteous anger and said unto Moses: "Go down at once! These are your people as well as mine now; they regard us both as those who brought them up out of the land of Egypt, and now hath they acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that

we commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

But Moses implored Aaron, and said, “Why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, sworn servants unto the same god as your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

And Aaron changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people. But he directed his wrath unto the two stone tablets in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. Said he: “The tablets were the work of the Lord Our God, but the writing was the writing of Isis and Osiris, engraved upon the tablets.”

And Moses, who had been placid, had his anger wax hot, and said “What benefit is there to lead the Israelites out of Egypt if the Lord Their God held so dear is nothing but a graven image of the words of Egyptian gods? Thou hast managed to blaspheme against two pantheons at once!” And he cast the stone tablets out of Aaron’s hands, and broke them beneath the mountain.

At once Aaron ran unto the burning chariot, half of which lay still unconsumed by the pillar of flame, and rifled he through its items, seeking to plunder the excess stone tablets and engraving tools that Reuel had offered unto him as a parting gift. “There must be a Word of God,” cried Aaron. “For all covenants are based on their words, and without a covenant, no people can be docile, nor compliant, nor obedient, nor passive, nor content with the will of others.”

Moses saw the truth of this, and joined Aaron in his plundering of the chariot’s stock. Foundeth they the excess stone tablets, and the engraving tools, and snatched them from the flames. And Aaron set them down upon the ground, and set himself before them, and graveth upon them ten commandments, saying unto Moses: “At first there were seven, but this idolatry and stiff-neckedness call for another three, to forestall these malfeasances I had thought not of.”

And then graveth he the original seven, plus the following novel trinity:

THOU SHALT NOT MAKE UNTO THEE ANY GRAVEN IMAGE

REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY, TO KEEP IT HOLY

THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST THY NEIGHBOR

Moses agreed these were good, and the two men slept peacefully, warmed by the chariot still burning nearby.

CHAPTER 25

And it came to pass that on the dawn of the forty-first day, Aaron and Moses descended from Mount Horeb, and returned unto the Israelite encampment. And before them lay the golden calf, surrounded by braziers and censers and all manner of burning thing. Even in the daylight, the reflections of the burnings upon the calf's gilded hide were discernible to all, yea, present in the sight of all men. Dozens of Israelites, their faith weakened from their years in Egypt, stood transfixed, staring at the golden calf, and occasionally nodding or mouthing words or otherwise evincing reactions as though the calf spoke unto them.

Moses looked at Aaron and saw that Aaron was just as transfixed by the sight of the Israelite idolaters as were they by the sight of the calf. Moses was disquieted by Aaron's pose. He seemed to be loosening his grip upon the world.

Moses stepped away from Aaron and cried out unto the idolaters, "Behold, I make a covenant: before all thy people I will do marvels, such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation: and all the people among which thou art shall see the work of the Lord: for it is a terrible thing that I will do with thee. Observe thou that which I command thee this day: behold, I drive out before thee the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite. Take heed to thyself, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither thou goest, lest it be for a snare in the midst of thee: but ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: for thou shalt worship no other god: for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God: lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a-whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice; and thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a-whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a-whoring after their gods."

Aaron, and the Israelite idolaters, and nearby Israelites who had not been worshiping the golden calf, stopped and stared and listened unto Moses, but said nothing in return.

Moses continued: "Thou shalt make thee no molten gods! Whoso is on the Lord's side, let him come unto me."

The man in black robes with a face shrouded in shadow, Korah the Levite, called unto Moses from the multitude, saying, "I would look upon these tablets bearing upon them the Word of the Lord Our God, and the terms of our covenant unto Him."

Korah approached Moses, who handed the stone tablets unto him. Korah studied them and then handed them back. He cried out unto Moses in a loud voice, saying: "It is not from God that you hath received these commandments; thou hast invented them yourself."

And only then did Aaron recognize Korah, and realize that his stratagem to slaughter and usurp the Levites, back in Egypt, had missed a mark. Aaron was afraid.

Moses replied unto Korah, saying, “I hath invented nothing. Yea, the flesh and bones of my hands operated the engraver’s tools; but the graven words arose not from my mind, but the mind of another, verily, the mind of the Lord Our God.”

“Knowest thou the mind of God?” asked Korah. “Let me ask of Him, then, by way of thine ears, and in anticipation of an answer from Him, by way of thy mouth, some questions about His laws.”

“Proceed,” said Moses.

Said Korah: “Does a tallit made entirely of techelet need fringes?”

Moses trembled, but said: “Yes.”

Replied Korah: “The blue color of the ṭallit does not make it ritually correct, yet according to your statement four blue threads do so.”

Moses said nothing.

Said Korah: “Does a house filled with the books of the Law need a mezuzah?”

Moses replied: “Yes.”

Said Korah: “The presence of the whole Torah, which contains 175 chapters, does not make a house fit for habitation, yet you say that one chapter of it does so.”

Moses said nothing.

Cried Korah unto the assembled Israelites: “Lo, I say again! It is not from God that Moses hath received these commandments; Moses hath invented them himself.”

Murmurings of discontentment and melodies of insurrection breathed through the assembled Israelites, regardless of whether they had worshiped at the golden calf or not.

Moses turned aside to address Aaron, and said softly, “Hast thou any stratagem?”

“I shall ere next we speak,” replied Aaron softly. Then he stepped forward and addressed Korah: “Korah the Levite, is that you?”

“Yes, it is, Joseph the chief vizier of Pharaoh’s court,” said Korah. “Surpriseth thee do I by my quickness?”

“Surpriseth me in joy, thou certainly dost,” said Aaron, with warmth. “I had heard you were put to the khopesh without cause, that fateful night that Pharaoh slew the Hyksos.”

“Fateful wast that night indeed,” replied Korah. “For every guardsman of Pharaoh’s had been told, ‘Put ye every man his khopesh upon his thigh, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the city, minding ye the presence of lamb’s blood smeared on the lintel, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour.’ And the sons of Levi, who had done according to the word of thine, Joseph, and smeared their lintel with the telltale blood, fell they that day; about three thousand men, boys, and grown women of Levi.”

Two other men nearby stepped forward and spake unto Aaron: “Are these words of Korah’s the truth?”

Aaron replied unto them, “What are thy names?”

The man who had spoken said, “Dathan,” and the man who had not said, “Abiram.”

Aaron replied, “Of what tribes?”

Spake Dathan, “Abiram is my brother. We are both sons of Reuben.”

Aaron was filled with the spirit of God, and said unto Dathan and Abiram: “Thy question is valid, and it shall not go unanswered. But first I must converse with my brother Korah – or is it cousin? – whom I thought dead but now find alive, and this fruition doth gladden me exceedingly.”

Dathan and Abiram slunk away, murmuring, but peaceable.

Aaron turned aside unto Moses and said softly: “Hath we a tent? Or tents?”

Moses turned aside unto Potiphar and said softly, “Constructeth thee a tent, in which meetings can occur. A tent of meeting.”

“How many people?” asked Potiphar.

“Five,” answered Aaron.

“I go to and execute this command,” replied Potiphar, and took his leave, and did as he was bid.

Aaron turned aside unto Moses and said softly, “Thank you.”

“The dynamics of rule are in flux,” replied Moses. “Thou must feel free to make use of me when the situation calls louder for my talents than thine; and I must feel free to make use of thee when thy talents are called for louder than mine.”

“Agreed,” said Aaron. “Our situation is like unto a parable, yea, the parable of the two talents.”

“Hast thou any reply or rejoinder of substance?” demanded Korah, by and by.

“O Levite brother, hath I no quarrel with thee,” said Aaron unto Korah. “In one hour’s time let us meet again, within the tent of meeting I hath ordered constructed. Bringest thou thyself and thy cousins of Reuben, Dathan and Abiram, and any others thou wish, and we shall speak directly and peaceably.”

“Very well,” said Korah, and took his leave.

CHAPTER 26

Aaron and Moses walked through the encampment towards the spot where Potiphar labored upon the tent of meeting. They passed many tents, and wagons, and clusters of pots and baskets and burlap sacks. They passed the men and women and children of Israel, who saw Moses their prophet walk amongst them, and cried they out unto him, “O Moses, woe, woe, would that we were given flesh to eat! We remember the fish, which we were wont to eat in Egypt for nought; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic; but now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all, O Moses, we have nought!”

And Moses heard the people weeping, family by family, every man at the door of his tent; and the anger of Aaron was kindled greatly; and Moses was displeased. And Moses said unto Aaron: “Wherefore hast thou dealt ill with thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me? Have I conceived all this people? have I brought them forth, that thou shouldest say unto me: Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing-father carrieth the sucking child, unto the land which thou didst swear unto their fathers? Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people? for they trouble me with their weeping, saying: Give us flesh, that we may eat. I am not able to bear all this people myself alone, because it is too heavy for me. And if thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray thee, out of hand, if I have found favour in thy sight; and let me not look upon my wretchedness.”

Replieth Aaron did: “O my prophet: one stratagem at a time.”

Arriveth did they at the tent of meeting, whose construction did Potiphar momentarily complete. And Aaron looked at the tent of meeting, and saw that it was good, and thanked Potiphar, and Potiphar and Moses were glad.

Then Aaron spoke privately unto Moses and Potiphar regarding the impending stratagem, and Aaron sent Potiphar on an errand. And Potiphar took his leave and did as he was bid.

Korah arrived at the tent of meeting, at the hour appointed by Aaron, and brought with him Dathan, and Abiram, and 247 other men of Israel, unto whom Korah had been polemisying and amongst whom the grumblings hence waxeth did. These 247 were princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them: “Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord Our God is among them; wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the assembly of the Lord Our God?” And when Moses heard it, his hand fell upon his face, and he spake nothing.

Aaron spoke unto Korah and unto all his company, saying: “In the morning the Lord Our God will show who are His, and who is holy, and will cause him to come near unto Him; even him whom He may choose will He cause to come near unto Him. This do: take you censers, Korah, and all his company; and put fire therein, and put incense upon them before the Lord Our God to-morrow; and it shall be that the man whom the Lord Our God doth choose, he shall be holy; ye take too much upon you, ye sons of Levi.”

And Moses said unto Korah: “Hear now, ye sons of Levi: is it but a small thing unto you, that the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the service of the tabernacle of the Lord Our God, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them; and that He hath brought thee near, and all thy brethren the sons of Levi with thee? and will ye seek the priesthood also? Therefore thou and all thy company that are gathered together against the Lord; and as to Aaron, what is he that ye murmur against him?”

Said Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab: “We will not go up; is it a small thing that thou hast brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, but thou must needs make thyself also a prince over us? Moreover thou hast not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards; wilt thou put out the eyes of these men? we will not go up.”

And Moses was very wroth, and said unto Aaron: “Respect not Thou their offering; I have not taken one ass from them, neither have I hurt one of them.” And Moses said unto Korah: “Be thou and all thy congregation before the Lord Our God, thou, and they, and Aaron, to-morrow; and take ye every man his fire-pan, and put incense upon them, and bring ye before the Lord Our God every man his fire-pan, two hundred and fifty fire-pans; thou also, and Aaron, each his fire-pan.”

Korah agreed to these terms, and relented peaceably upon the remainder of the day.

The next day, all 250 rebels of Korah assembled at the tent of meeting, every one with incense and a fire-pan. And they took every man his fire-pan, and put fire in them, and laid incense thereon, and stood at the door of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron. And Korah assembled all the congregation against them unto the door of the tent of meeting.

“Marcheth now we 252 unto Mount Horeb, where the Lord Our God doth dwell upon the earth, to tremble at His presence and beseech His knowings.”

“Moses,” said Aaron next, “profferest thou thy fire-pan unto me, and take up thy staff instead; for you shall lead this column of Israelites up the mountain, while I hang back behind thee; for thou art the anointed prophet of the Lord Our God, and I am naught but thine assistant, and the leader of a column ought leaneth unto the comfort of his staff.”

The congregation heard Aaron’s words, and were peaceable, and Moses did as he was bid.

CHAPTER 27

Set they out unto the path leading up to Mount Horeb, as Aaron had decreed, with Moses at the fore, carrying his staff, with Aaron just behind; Korah, and Dathan and Abiram, behind Aaron; the 247 other men of Korah's rebels behind them. And Moses was the only man in the procession without incense, and without a fire-pan.

As they lit out from camp, Potiphar passed near the procession, and strained to catch the eye of Aaron. When Aaron spied Potiphar, the Egyptian nodded once at him, and Aaron returned the nod.

The last time Aaron and Moses had ascended Mount Horeb, the heavens had been fierce and recalcitrant, with rain and wind and lightning and thunder. But this day was calm and clear. And it came to pass that the congregation encountered that great fissure in the mountain, yea, the maw of the earth that would have swallowed up Moses during that first vertiginous ascent, had Aaron not been there to steady him.

Yet the rocks above the fissure were slick, e'en though no rain had fallen for weeks; and Korah's rebels stumbled and staggered at times, struggling to keep their censers alight.

Aaron spake low unto Moses, saying: "Separate yourself from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment." And Moses was afraid, and quickened his step, and held tighter unto his staff.

Aaron stopped and turned and hurled his censer, burning with incense, back into the midst of Korah's rebels, who were too intent upon their footfalls to notice the menace of his action.

Aaron's censer hit the rocks, and spilled forth ember and flame upon them, and ignited at once an enormous blaze, in which Korah and all his rebels were instantly engulfed. And fire came forth from the Lord Our God, and devoured the two hundred and fifty men that offered the incense.

For Aaron had earlier dispatched Potiphar upon an errand, which was to drown and soak the rocks above the great fissure in the earth with oil, oil which burneth, and loyal Potiphar had executed his errand faithfully.

As Korah's rebels writhed and screamed and endeavored to delay their inevitable falling into the great fissure in the earth, Aaron said: "Hereby ye shall know that the Lord Our God hath sent Moses and me to do all these works, and that I have not done them of mine own mind. If you men had died the common death of all men, and been visited after the visitation of all men, then the Lord Our God hath not sent us. But if the Lord Our God make a new thing, and the earth open Her mouth, and swallow them up, with all that appertain unto them, and they go down alive into the pit, then ye shall understand that these men have despised the Lord Our God."

Aaron and Moses returned to the Israelite encampment, where they found that Potiphar had hacked to pieces the golden calf, and it resembled an idol no longer, but rather a pile of twisted ribbons of metal. Aaron and Moses thanked Potiphar, and then retired unto the tent of meeting.

CHAPTER 28

Said Moses, “The whole community grumbles against us, saying, ‘If only we had died by the Lord Our God’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.’”

Aaron asked of Potiphar, “Where are the 300 mules seized from the Levites during Exodus?”

Replied Potiphar, “I shall fetch Joshua, for he held custody of the Levite plunder last I knew.” And he took his leave, and did as he had said.

Then Aaron said to Moses, “We will rain down bread from heaven for them. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.”

“Bread?” asked Moses. “E’en if the Levite mules had once stocked bread, it shall long be moldy ere now.”

“Grain, then,” replied Aaron.

“What if there is not enough grain for all the nation of Israel’s six hundred thousand?” asked Moses.

Aaron ignored him, and instead said: “You shall say unto the Israelites, ‘In the evening you will know that it was the Lord Our God who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord Our God, because He has heard your grumbling against Him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?’”

Moses rehearsed: “You will know that it was the Lord Our God when He gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because He has heard your grumbling against Him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord Our God.”

Said Aaron: “Say to the entire Israelite community, ‘Come before the Lord Our God, for He has heard your grumbling. At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.’”

Potiphar entered the tent of meeting with Joshua in tow.

“Hail, Joshua,” said Aaron and Moses.

“Hail, masters,” said Joshua.

“Where are the 300 mules seized from the Levites during Exodus?” said Aaron unto Joshua.

“They are among the train of Ephraim,” replied Joshua.

“Bearest they any bread or grain?” asked Moses.

“No bread, O my prophet,” said Joshua. “But there are thousands of baskets of barley. Over a million omers, I reckon.”

“That shall do,” said Aaron.

But Moses said, “Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, ‘I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!’ Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?”

Aaron said to Joshua: “Bring me seventy of Israel’s elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will speak with you there, and Moses will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on him and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with him so that he will not have to carry it alone.”

“Yes, master,” said Joshua, and brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. Then Moses took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And Moses did his best to deliver the message that he had rehearsed with Aaron, and said unto the seventy elders, “Tell the people: ‘Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat. The Lord Our God heard you when you wailed, “If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!” Now the Lord Our God will give you meat, and you will eat it. You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month – until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it – because you have rejected the Lord Our God, who is among you, and have wailed before Him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?”””

And Joshua and the seventy elders took their leave of the tent of meeting, and did as they were bid, spreading word of the meat to come.

Aaron was wroth, and quoth unto Moses, “‘Until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it?’”

Answered Moses, “Lo, is my Lord’s arm too short?”

Aaron regained his peace and said only: “Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you.”

CHAPTER 29

Aaron turned unto Potiphar and said: “Fetch thee one basket of barley from the train of Ephraim, and two hours before the break of day, scatter all the barley therein upon the ground, within the bounds of the encampment.”

Said Moses: “You shall force them to gather it from off the ground?”

Aaron replied: “The barley shall be gathered off the ground, and the Israelites shall gather food from off the ground, but nay, the Israelites shall not gather barley off the ground.”

And Moses’s hand fell upon his face, and he took his leave from the tent of meeting.

The next morning, a wind went out from the Lord Our God and drove quail in from the sea. It scattered them up to two cubits deep all around the camp, as far as a day’s walk in any direction. All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than ten homers. Then they spread them out all around the camp.

And while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, Moses approached Aaron, and placed his hand upon the sole remaining Levite male’s shoulder, and said softly, “The quail shall gather barley off the ground, and the Israelites shall gather quail off the ground, for food.”

Replied Aaron softly, “See, O ye of little faith? For I am still thy capable oracle, serving up riddles and crypticisms unto my Pharaoh, to delight and amaze.”

By evening the quail had been cleared from the encampment, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” for they did not know what it was. They called the substance *manna*, because that is the Romanized transliteration of the Hebrew hyphenization of the Hebrew interrogative “What is it?” The manna was like coriander seed and also looked like resin and also resembled bdellium and also was as like unto hoarfrost, and other sundry descriptors. And it tasted like cakes baked with olive oil and wafers made with honey, and other sundry descriptors. The people went around gathering it, and then ground it in a hand mill or crushed it in a mortar or cooked it in a pot or made it into loaves, and other sundry preparations. And the Israelites came to learn that when the dew settled on the camp at night, the manna also came down.

Moses said to them, “What thou callest manna is the bread the Lord Our God has given you to eat. This is what the Lord Our God has commanded: ‘Everyone is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.’” The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed.

Then Moses said to them, “No one is to keep any of it until morning.” However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them.

Each morning everyone gathered as much as they needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away. On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much – two omers for each person – and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. He said to them, “This is what the Lord commanded: ‘Tomorrow is to be a day of Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord Our God. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.’” So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it.

“Eat it today,” Moses said, “because today is a Sabbath to the Lord Our God. You will not find any of it on the ground today. Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any.” Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. Then said Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep the Lord Our God’s commands and instructions? Bear in mind that the Lord Our God has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day He gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where they are on the seventh day; no one is to go out.” So the people rested on the seventh day.

Manna was quail guano. Aaron knew he did not have enough barley for all the Israelites to bake bread for themselves, for the full duration of the wanderings throughout the Wilderness of Sin that lay ahead of them, so he conserved his barley stocks by commanding Potiphar to scatter, the night before every Sabbath day, a portion of barley about the encampment, to draw in the flocks of quail from the heavens above. The quail descended upon the camp while the Israelites were inside their tents observing the Sabbath day, and were therefore free to feast unmolested upon the barley; and the feeding frenzies of the quailflocks left upon the ground a thick coating of their guano, which the Israelites ate and called *manna* for years upon years, miserable and desperate and deceived, with their ribcages protruding as starvingly as their eyes recedeth did, until they came to a land that was settled; yea, they ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan. But more had yet to transpire in the intervenement.

And it came to pass that the Israelites in the Wilderness of Sin finally became obedient unto the Lord Their God, and came to trust their prophet Moses, and his coterie of advisors, Aaron, Joshua, and Potiphar. They grumbled no more, and honored the Law, and adhered to the will of the god made in the image of Aaron’s innermost self, I Am That I Am. And there was peace.

CHAPTER 30

Elisheba, who was nearly fruited with her and Aaron's first child, saw little of her husband, busy as he was adjudicating the operation of the encampment. She missed him. By and by, a small stratagem occurred to her, to reclaim Aaron's attention. She summoned Joshua.

"O my mistress, how might I be of service to thee?" asked Joshua.

"Knowest thou of any skilled craftsmen, or fashioners or artificers of any type, with wood or textile or precious metals or stones?" asked Elisheba.

"There is one in the encampment named Aholiab," said Joshua, "Son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, an engraver, and a cunning workman, and an embroiderer in blue, and in purple, and in scarlet, and fine linen."

"Summon him for me," said Elisheba.

"Yes, O my mistress," replied Joshua, and took his leave, and did as he was bid.

By and by, Aholiab called upon Elisheba, saying: "Thou hast summoned me, O my mistress?"

"Well met, Aholiab," replied Elisheba. "Joshua hath enumerated your talents as a cunning worker of engraving and embroidering."

"Yes, O my mistress," said Aholiab.

"I wish a gift made, for my husband," said she. "I know not whether it best take the shape of a brooch, or a breastplate of armor, or an embroiderment upon a garment, but I know what antecedents it must resemble."

"What antecedents are those, O my mistress?" asked Aholiab.

"Two vessels, side by side," said Elisheba. "One being an urn, but the other being less definite: lo, a pot, or jug, or pan, or basket. An urn, and a vessel."

"Yes, O my mistress," said Aholiab, in perplexity.

"A pitched basket!" cried Elisheba with sudden certainty. "Seen thou ever the pitched baskets used to float grain down the Nile, back during the days of Egypt?"

"Yes, O my mistress," said Aholiab. "I suggest an urn of metal –"

"Of gold," said she.

"An urn of gold, and a pitched basket of embroidery, mounted both side-by-side upon a thin strip of shittim wood, with a gold pin for affixing?" offered Aholiab.

“Yes, O master artificer!” said Elisheba.

“So long there be shittim, so let it be done,” intoned Aholiab, and took his leave, and did as he was bid.

CHAPTER 31

Less than one hour's time passed ere another caller appeared at the flap of Elisheba's tent.

"Who goes?" called Elisheba.

"Thy sister, Miriam," said she.

"Enter at once, O my beloved eldest sister," said Elisheba. Miriam did. They embraced, and admired each other's bellies, for both were plump with child.

"Wherefore dost thou speak with Aholiab?" asked Miriam, then: "Hold – are we alone?" And Elisheba sent her servants and handmaidens away.

"Hath I commissioned a brooch for mine husband Aaron, as a gift, and Aholiab's talents are needed to produce it," said Elisheba.

"Oh," replied Miriam.

Elisheba grew suspicious. "Wherefore?"

"Aholiab hath been given control of the 300 mules plundered from the Levites back in Egypt," said Miriam, "by reason of their being flush with precious metals."

Asked Elisheba: "Is not Aholiab of the tribe of Dan? Thought I the Levite plunder were in the custody of Ephraim?"

"And so it remains," replied Miriam, "but unfettered access thereunto hath been granted unto him, by reason of his workmanship, for verily, he is the most cunning man in camp."

"Dost thou also order a brooch, as a gift for Moses?" ventured Elisheba.

"Yea, may Moses die in a fire," said Miriam. "Metals are not the only precious thing atop the Levite mules. For they also carry huge quantities of myrrh."

Elisheba clutched her belly and said unto Miriam: "Et in Arcadia ego...."

"Thou knewest not," replied Miriam. "I offer the myrrh not unto thee, for I know thou lov'st thy husband, and wish to bear him sons, and while this may meet as incest of the heart, at least it fails as incest of the blood."

"Darest thee!" cried Elisheba.

"Yes, little sister, darest I," said Miriam. "I judge no woman, least of all thee. The only judging I do is of the amount of myrrh administered unto my other sisters, that they might defeat our father's determination to work incest of the blood."

Said Elisheba: “How much myrrh is there?”

“For eleven women? Enough to last years. Maybe decades,” replied Miriam.

“Our father will discover it,” said Elisheba.

“Not by any living mouth,” said Miriam. “Only if my misstep kills a sister might the truth be known. For I am not a trained qedeshu, yet this barren hellscape hath forced the trade upon me.”

Elisheba gestured unto Miriam’s belly and said, “Thine own baby yet lives.”

“The first tide of blood must seem to be a miscarriage,” said Miriam. “I will miscarry, nearly at term. If I survive, I will induce it in the other ten.”

“And then?” asked Elisheba.

“To the eyes of Moses, it will appear as though the original curse of the oracles, yea, of the Sphinx and Pythia, once thought vanquished, shall resurrect, and follow him where’er his wicked wanderings take him. No seed of his shall take root in any womb of ours, no matter how often attempteth he our comfort with his rod,” said Miriam.

Elisheba sat in silence thinking. By and by, said she: “What is the Canaanite for *qedeshu*?”

“I know not, nor care not,” replied Miriam. “The Canaanite tongue, the Canaanite gods, the Canaanite culture: all may perish in the same flames I wished upon our father. All save the Canaanite people themselves, for they are just as much the victims of this wickedness as are we. Their ceaseless cries of yearning for Egypt art the only thing out of their mouths that seem pure and undeluded to me.”

“*Kadesh*,” said Elisheba, ignoring her sister’s venom. “Henceforth, when needst thou to refer to myrrh, or the qedeshic art, in a way that inviteth unwanted inquiry not, alludest thee unto ‘the land of Kadesh,’ or ‘the city of Kadesh,’ or ‘the fields of Kadesh.’”

Miriam looked at her sister momentarily, ere embraceth they. “Thank you, little sister,” said she. And then she took her leave.

CHAPTER 32

And it came to pass that Aaron summoned Moses to the tent of meeting, and they spoke in private.

“Things are well,” said Moses.

“Thou namest my fear,” said Aaron. “What am I?”

“I take not thy meaning,” said Moses.

“What am I?” repeated Aaron. “How do the Israelites see me? What role playest I in their eyes?”

“In their eyes you are my assistant,” replied Moses.

“Verily,” said Aaron. “Yet e’en that arrow fly not true. For thou art their prophet, and Potiphar thy manservant, and Joshua thy general, and Aholiab thy quartermaster, and the seventy elders thy messengers. What space remains for an assistant?”

And Moses said: “Thou art the High Priest of the Lord Our God.”

And Aaron grew still, and said: “I would hear more.”

“Prophets know the words of their gods, the commands issued by their gods, but they know not the minds of their gods,” said Moses. "High priests know the minds of their gods – as much as anyone can, save the gods themselves. They can divine the moods and meanings and tastes and preferences of their gods through keen observation, and calm reflection, not having to stand about idly between utterances therefrom, as do prophets.”

Aaron was uncertain. “Do you mock me?” he asked softly – soft not with menace, but in earnest.

“Nay, I do not,” said Moses tenderly. “My respect for thee has ne’er been trivial, and with each stratagem you actualize, it doth grow in leaps and bounds. Thy mind is the finest ever to walk the earth – or at least, ever to walk the Egyptian empire and the Wilderness of Sin. Name a god, of any people or pantheon, and thou couldst easily come to know his mind in time.”

“Thank you,” said Aaron, and pauseth then did he to forestall the overflowing of his Urim and Thummim. Then he said: “I shall found a priesthood. Lo, I shall found a priesthood of the Lord Our God, and presideth over it as High Priest. And we shall work together with peace and clarity, Moses: for ye shall be His mouthpiece, yet I shall be His confidant.”

“Splendid,” said Moses, and made as if to take his leave.

“I shall need thee to summit Horeb again,” said Aaron.

“To receive the commands of the Lord Our God?” asked Moses.

“Verily,” said Aaron.

“And hast thou any notions of what commands He might deliver unto me?” asked Moses.

“I shall ere next we speak,” said Aaron, and when Moses again made as if to take his leave, Aaron spake: “Ready a mule for thy journey.” And Moses assented and departed.

Aaron set himself before his remaining stone tablets, and engraving tools, and graveth he his public legacy, for Moses to burden his mule with, and to study and memorize atop Mount Horeb, and, having committed them to memory, to destroy there upon the mountain.

And it came to pass that Aaron did deliver his public legacy unto Moses in the coming days, and Moses did lead his mule burdened therewith up Mount Horeb, and spent he days and weeks memorizing it all, and then hurled he they unto the great fissure in the mountain, into which he had once nearly fallen, and into which Korah’s rebels surely had, ablaze and screaming as they plunged. And at long last returneth did he unto the Israelite encampment, one month to the day after proposing a priesthood unto Aaron.

CHAPTER 33

Moses called a meeting of the seventy elders, at which Aaron, Potiphar, Joshua, and Aholiab were also present. And Moses spake unto the children of Israel, saying, “Thus saith the Lord Our God: bring me an offering: of every man that giveth it willingly with his heart ye shall take my offering. And this is the offering which ye shall take of them; gold, and silver, and brass, and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats’ hair, and rams’ skins dyed red, and badgers’ skins, and shittim wood, oil for the light, spices for anointing oil, and for sweet incense, onyx stones, and stones to be set in the ephod, and in the breastplate. And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it. And they shall make an ark of shittim wood: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof, and a cubit and a half the height thereof. And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, within and without shalt thou overlay it, and shalt make upon it a crown of gold round about. And thou shalt cast four rings of gold for it, and put them in the four corners thereof; and two rings shall be in the one side of it, and two rings in the other side of it. And thou shalt make staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold. And thou shalt put the staves into the rings by the sides of the ark, that the ark may be borne with them. The staves shall be in the rings of the ark: they shall not be taken from it. And thou shalt put into the ark the testimony which I shall give thee. And thou shalt make a mercy seat of pure gold: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof. And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat. And make one cherub on the one end, and the other cherub on the other end: even of the mercy seat shall ye make the cherubims on the two ends thereof. And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be. And thou shalt put the mercy seat above upon the ark; and in the ark thou shalt put the testimony that I shall give thee. And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel. Thou shalt also make a table of shittim wood: two cubits shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof, and a cubit and a half the height thereof. And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, and make thereto a crown of gold round about. And thou shalt make unto it a border of an hand breadth round about, and thou shalt make a golden crown to the border thereof round about. And thou shalt make for it four rings of gold, and put the rings in the four corners that are on the four feet thereof. Over against the border shall the rings be for places of the staves to bear the table. And thou shalt make the staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold, that the table may be borne with them. And thou shalt make the dishes thereof, and spoons thereof, and covers thereof, and bowls thereof, to cover withal: of pure gold shalt thou make them. And thou shalt set upon the table shewbread before me alway. And thou shalt make a candlestick of pure gold: of beaten work shall the candlestick be made: his shaft, and his branches, his bowls, his knops, and his flowers, shall be of the same. And six branches shall come out of the sides of it; three branches of the candlestick out of the one side, and three branches of the candlestick out of the other side: Three bowls made like unto almonds, with a knop and a flower in one branch; and three bowls made like almonds in the other branch, with a knop and a flower: so in the six branches that come out of the candlestick. And in the candlesticks shall be four bowls made like unto almonds, with their

knops and their flowers. And there shall be a knop under two branches of the same, and a knop under two branches of the same, and a knop under two branches of the same, according to the six branches that proceed out of the candlestick. Their knops and their branches shall be of the same: all it shall be one beaten work of pure gold. And thou shalt make the seven lamps thereof: and they shall light the lamps thereof, that they may give light over against it. And the tongs thereof, and the snuffdishes thereof, shall be of pure gold. Of a talent of pure gold shall he make it, with all these vessels. And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount. Moreover thou shalt make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen, and blue, and purple, and scarlet: with cherubims of cunning work shalt thou make them. The length of one curtain shall be eight and twenty cubits, and the breadth of one curtain four cubits: and every one of the curtains shall have one measure. The five curtains shall be coupled together one to another; and other five curtains shall be coupled one to another. And thou shalt make loops of blue upon the edge of the one curtain from the selvedge in the coupling; and likewise shalt thou make in the uttermost edge of another curtain, in the coupling of the second. Fifty loops shalt thou make in the one curtain, and fifty loops shalt thou make in the edge of the curtain that is in the coupling of the second; that the loops may take hold one of another. And thou shalt make fifty taches of gold, and couple the curtains together with the taches: and it shall be one tabernacle. And thou shalt make curtains of goats' hair to be a covering upon the tabernacle: eleven curtains shalt thou make. The length of one curtain shall be thirty cubits, and the breadth of one curtain four cubits: and the eleven curtains shall be all of one measure. And thou shalt couple five curtains by themselves, and six curtains by themselves, and shalt double the sixth curtain in the forefront of the tabernacle. And thou shalt make fifty loops on the edge of the one curtain that is outmost in the coupling, and fifty loops in the edge of the curtain which coupleth the second. And thou shalt make fifty taches of brass, and put the taches into the loops, and couple the tent together, that it may be one. And the remnant that remaineth of the curtains of the tent, the half curtain that remaineth, shall hang over the backside of the tabernacle. And a cubit on the one side, and a cubit on the other side of that which remaineth in the length of the curtains of the tent, it shall hang over the sides of the tabernacle on this side and on that side, to cover it. And thou shalt make a covering for the tent of rams' skins dyed red, and a covering above of badgers' skins. And thou shalt make boards for the tabernacle of shittim wood standing up. Ten cubits shall be the length of a board, and a cubit and a half shall be the breadth of one board. Two tenons shall there be in one board, set in order one against another: thus shalt thou make for all the boards of the tabernacle. And thou shalt make the boards for the tabernacle, twenty boards on the south side southward. And thou shalt make forty sockets of silver under the twenty boards; two sockets under one board for his two tenons, and two sockets under another board for his two tenons. And for the second side of the tabernacle on the north side there shall be twenty boards: And their forty sockets of silver; two sockets under one board, and two sockets under another board. And for the sides of the tabernacle westward thou shalt make six boards. And two boards shalt thou make for the corners of the tabernacle in the two sides. And they shall be coupled together beneath, and they shall be coupled together above the head of it unto one ring: thus shall it be for them both; they shall be for the two corners. And they shall be eight boards, and their sockets of silver, sixteen sockets; two sockets under one board, and two sockets under another board. And thou shalt make bars of shittim wood; five for the boards of the one side of the tabernacle, and five bars for the boards of the other side of the tabernacle, and five bars for the boards of the side of the tabernacle, for the two sides westward. And the middle bar in the midst of the boards shall reach from end to end. And thou shalt overlay the boards with gold, and

make their rings of gold for places for the bars: and thou shalt overlay the bars with gold. And thou shalt rear up the tabernacle according to the fashion thereof which was shewed thee in the mount. And thou shalt make a vail of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen of cunning work: with cherubims shall it be made: And thou shalt hang it upon four pillars of shittim wood overlaid with gold: their hooks shall be of gold, upon the four sockets of silver. And thou shalt hang up the vail under the taches, that thou mayest bring in thither within the vail the ark of the testimony: and the vail shall divide unto you between the holy place and the most holy. And thou shalt put the mercy seat upon the ark of the testimony in the most holy place. And thou shalt set the table without the vail, and the candlestick over against the table on the side of the tabernacle toward the south: and thou shalt put the table on the north side. And thou shalt make an hanging for the door of the tent, of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen, wrought with needlework. And thou shalt make for the hanging five pillars of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold, and their hooks shall be of gold: and thou shalt cast five sockets of brass for them. And thou shalt make an altar of shittim wood, five cubits long, and five cubits broad; the altar shall be foursquare: and the height thereof shall be three cubits. And thou shalt make the horns of it upon the four corners thereof: his horns shall be of the same: and thou shalt overlay it with brass. And thou shalt make his pans to receive his ashes, and his shovels, and his basons, and his fleshhooks, and his firepans: all the vessels thereof thou shalt make of brass. And thou shalt make for it a grate of network of brass; and upon the net shalt thou make four brasen rings in the four corners thereof. And thou shalt put it under the compass of the altar beneath, that the net may be even to the midst of the altar. And thou shalt make staves for the altar, staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with brass. And the staves shall be put into the rings, and the staves shall be upon the two sides of the altar, to bear it. Hollow with boards shalt thou make it: as it was shewed thee in the mount, so shall they make it. And thou shalt make the court of the tabernacle: for the south side southward there shall be hangings for the court of fine twined linen of an hundred cubits long for one side: And the twenty pillars thereof and their twenty sockets shall be of brass; the hooks of the pillars and their fillets shall be of silver. And likewise for the north side in length there shall be hangings of an hundred cubits long, and his twenty pillars and their twenty sockets of brass; the hooks of the pillars and their fillets of silver. And for the breadth of the court on the west side shall be hangings of fifty cubits: their pillars ten, and their sockets ten. And the breadth of the court on the east side eastward shall be fifty cubits. The hangings of one side of the gate shall be fifteen cubits: their pillars three, and their sockets three. And on the other side shall be hangings fifteen cubits: their pillars three, and their sockets three. And for the gate of the court shall be an hanging of twenty cubits, of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen, wrought with needlework: and their pillars shall be four, and their sockets four. All the pillars round about the court shall be filleted with silver; their hooks shall be of silver, and their sockets of brass. The length of the court shall be an hundred cubits, and the breadth fifty every where, and the height five cubits of fine twined linen, and their sockets of brass. All the vessels of the tabernacle in all the service thereof, and all the pins thereof, and all the pins of the court, shall be of brass. And thou shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring thee pure oil olive beaten for the light, to cause the lamp to burn always. In the tabernacle of the congregation without the vail, which is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall order it from evening to morning before the Lord: it shall be a statute for ever unto their generations on the behalf of the children of Israel. And take thou unto thee Aaron, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister unto me in the priest’s office. And thou shalt make holy garments for Aaron for glory and for beauty. And thou shalt speak

unto all that are wise hearted, whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they may make Aaron's garments to consecrate him, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office. And these are the garments which they shall make; a breastplate, and an ephod, and a robe, and a broidered coat, a mitre, and a girdle: and they shall make holy garments for Aaron, and his sons, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office. And they shall take gold, and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen. And they shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, and of purple, of scarlet, and fine twined linen, with cunning work. It shall have the two shoulderpieces thereof joined at the two edges thereof; and so it shall be joined together. And the curious girdle of the ephod, which is upon it, shall be of the same, according to the work thereof; even of gold, of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen. And thou shalt take two onyx stones, and grave on them the names of the children of Israel: Six of their names on one stone, and the other six names of the rest on the other stone, according to their birth. With the work of an engraver in stone, like the engravings of a signet, shalt thou engrave the two stones with the names of the children of Israel: thou shalt make them to be set in ouches of gold. And thou shalt put the two stones upon the shoulders of the ephod for stones of memorial unto the children of Israel: and Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord upon his two shoulders for a memorial. And thou shalt make ouches of gold; and two chains of pure gold at the ends; of wreathen work shalt thou make them, and fasten the wreathen chains to the ouches. And thou shalt make the breastplate of judgment with cunning work; after the work of the ephod thou shalt make it; of gold, of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, and of fine twined linen, shalt thou make it. Foursquare it shall be being doubled; a span shall be the length thereof, and a span shall be the breadth thereof. And thou shalt set in it settings of stones, even four rows of stones: the first row shall be a sardius, a topaz, and a carbuncle: this shall be the first row. And the second row shall be an emerald, a sapphire, and a diamond. And the third row a ligure, an agate, and an amethyst. And the fourth row a beryl, and an onyx, and a jasper: they shall be set in gold in their inclosings. And the stones shall be with the names of the children of Israel, twelve, according to their names, like the engravings of a signet; every one with his name shall they be according to the twelve tribes. And thou shalt make upon the breastplate chains at the ends of wreathen work of pure gold. And thou shalt make upon the breastplate two rings of gold, and shalt put the two rings on the two ends of the breastplate. And thou shalt put the two wreathen chains of gold in the two rings which are on the ends of the breastplate. And the other two ends of the two wreathen chains thou shalt fasten in the two ouches, and put them on the shoulderpieces of the ephod before it. And thou shalt make two rings of gold, and thou shalt put them upon the two ends of the breastplate in the border thereof, which is in the side of the ephod inward. And two other rings of gold thou shalt make, and shalt put them on the two sides of the ephod underneath, toward the forepart thereof, over against the other coupling thereof, above the curious girdle of the ephod. And they shall bind the breastplate by the rings thereof unto the rings of the ephod with a lace of blue, that it may be above the curious girdle of the ephod, and that the breastplate be not loosed from the ephod. And Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart, when he goeth in unto the holy place, for a memorial before the Lord continually. And thou shalt make the robe of the ephod all of blue. And there shall be an hole in the top of it, in the midst thereof: it shall have a binding of woven work round about the hole of it, as it were the hole of an habergeon, that it be not rent. And beneath upon the hem of it thou shalt make pomegranates of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, round about the hem thereof; and bells of gold between them round about: A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, upon the hem of the robe round about. And it shall be upon Aaron to minister: and his sound shall be heard

when he goeth in unto the holy place before the Lord, and when he cometh out, that he die not. And thou shalt make a plate of pure gold, and grave upon it, like the engravings of a signet, Holiness To The Lord. And thou shalt put it on a blue lace, that it may be upon the mitre; upon the forefront of the mitre it shall be. And it shall be upon Aaron's forehead, that Aaron may bear the iniquity of the holy things, which the children of Israel shall hallow in all their holy gifts; and it shall be always upon his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord. And thou shalt embroider the coat of fine linen, and thou shalt make the mitre of fine linen, and thou shalt make the girdle of needlework. And for Aaron's sons thou shalt make coats, and thou shalt make for them girdles, and bonnets shalt thou make for them, for glory and for beauty. And thou shalt put them upon Aaron, and his sons with him; and shalt anoint them, and consecrate them, and sanctify them, that they may minister unto me in the priest's office. And thou shalt make them linen breeches to cover their nakedness; from the loins even unto the thighs they shall reach: And they shall be upon Aaron, and upon his sons, when they come in unto the tabernacle of the congregation, or when they come near unto the altar to minister in the holy place; that they bear not iniquity, and die: it shall be a statute for ever unto him and his seed after him. And this is the thing that thou shalt do unto them to hallow them, to minister unto me in the priest's office: Take one young bullock, and two rams without blemish, and unleavened bread, and cakes unleavened tempered with oil, and wafers unleavened anointed with oil: of wheaten flour shalt thou make them. And thou shalt put them into one basket, and bring them in the basket, with the bullock and the two rams. And Aaron and his sons thou shalt bring unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and shalt wash them with water. And thou shalt take the garments, and put upon Aaron the coat, and the robe of the ephod, and the ephod, and the breastplate, and gird him with the curious girdle of the ephod: And thou shalt put the mitre upon his head, and put the holy crown upon the mitre. Then shalt thou take the anointing oil, and pour it upon his head, and anoint him. And thou shalt bring his sons, and put coats upon them. And thou shalt gird them with girdles, Aaron and his sons, and put the bonnets on them: and the priest's office shall be theirs for a perpetual statute: and thou shalt consecrate Aaron and his sons. And thou shalt cause a bullock to be brought before the tabernacle of the congregation: and Aaron and his sons shall put their hands upon the head of the bullock. And thou shalt kill the bullock before the Lord, by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And thou shalt take of the blood of the bullock, and put it upon the horns of the altar with thy finger, and pour all the blood beside the bottom of the altar. And thou shalt take all the fat that covereth the inwards, and the caul that is above the liver, and the two kidneys, and the fat that is upon them, and burn them upon the altar. But the flesh of the bullock, and his skin, and his dung, shalt thou burn with fire without the camp: it is a sin offering. Thou shalt also take one ram; and Aaron and his sons shall put their hands upon the head of the ram. And thou shalt slay the ram, and thou shalt take his blood, and sprinkle it round about upon the altar. And thou shalt cut the ram in pieces, and wash the inwards of him, and his legs, and put them unto his pieces, and unto his head. And thou shalt burn the whole ram upon the altar: it is a burnt offering unto the Lord: it is a sweet savour, an offering made by fire unto the Lord. And thou shalt take the other ram; and Aaron and his sons shall put their hands upon the head of the ram. Then shalt thou kill the ram, and take of his blood, and put it upon the tip of the right ear of Aaron, and upon the tip of the right ear of his sons, and upon the thumb of their right hand, and upon the great toe of their right foot, and sprinkle the blood upon the altar round about. And thou shalt take of the blood that is upon the altar, and of the anointing oil, and sprinkle it upon Aaron, and upon his garments, and upon his sons, and upon the garments of his sons with him: and he shall be hallowed, and his garments, and his sons, and his sons' garments

with him. Also thou shalt take of the ram the fat and the rump, and the fat that covereth the inwards, and the caul above the liver, and the two kidneys, and the fat that is upon them, and the right shoulder; for it is a ram of consecration: and one loaf of bread, and one cake of oiled bread, and one wafer out of the basket of the unleavened bread that is before the Lord: and thou shalt put all in the hands of Aaron, and in the hands of his sons; and shalt wave them for a wave offering before the Lord. And thou shalt receive them of their hands, and burn them upon the altar for a burnt offering, for a sweet savour before the Lord: it is an offering made by fire unto the Lord. And thou shalt take the breast of the ram of Aaron's consecration, and wave it for a wave offering before the Lord: and it shall be thy part. And thou shalt sanctify the breast of the wave offering, and the shoulder of the heave offering, which is waved, and which is heaved up, of the ram of the consecration, even of that which is for Aaron, and of that which is for his sons: and it shall be Aaron's and his sons' by a statute for ever from the children of Israel: for it is an heave offering: and it shall be an heave offering from the children of Israel of the sacrifice of their peace offerings, even their heave offering unto the Lord. And the holy garments of Aaron shall be his sons; after him, to be anointed therein, and to be consecrated in them. And that son that is priest in his stead shall put them on seven days, when he cometh into the tabernacle of the congregation to minister in the holy place. And thou shalt take the ram of the consecration, and seethe his flesh in the holy place. And Aaron and his sons shall eat the flesh of the ram, and the bread that is in the basket by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And they shall eat those things wherewith the atonement was made, to consecrate and to sanctify them: but a stranger shall not eat thereof, because they are holy. And if ought of the flesh of the consecrations, or of the bread, remain unto the morning, then thou shalt burn the remainder with fire: it shall not be eaten, because it is holy. And thus shalt thou do unto Aaron, and to his sons, according to all things which I have commanded thee: seven days shalt thou consecrate them. And thou shalt offer every day a bullock for a sin offering for atonement: and thou shalt cleanse the altar, when thou hast made an atonement for it, and thou shalt anoint it, to sanctify it. Seven days thou shalt make an atonement for the altar, and sanctify it; and it shall be an altar most holy: whatsoever toucheth the altar shall be holy. Now this is that which thou shalt offer upon the altar; two lambs of the first year day by day continually. The one lamb thou shalt offer in the morning; and the other lamb thou shalt offer at even: and with the one lamb a tenth deal of flour mingled with the fourth part of an hin of beaten oil; and the fourth part of an hin of wine for a drink offering. And the other lamb thou shalt offer at even, and shalt do thereto according to the meat offering of the morning, and according to the drink offering thereof, for a sweet savour, an offering made by fire unto the Lord. This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the Lord: where I will meet you, to speak there unto thee. And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory. And I will sanctify the tabernacle of the congregation, and the altar: I will sanctify also both Aaron and his sons, to minister to me in the priest's office. And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the Lord their God. And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon: of shittim wood shalt thou make it. A cubit shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof; foursquare shall it be: and two cubits shall be the height thereof: the horns thereof shall be of the same. And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, the top thereof, and the sides thereof round about, and the horns thereof; and thou shalt make unto it a crown of gold round about. And two golden rings shalt thou make to it under the crown of it, by the two corners thereof, upon the two sides of it shalt

thou make it; and they shall be for places for the staves to bear it withal. And thou shalt make the staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold. And thou shalt put it before the vail that is by the ark of the testimony, before the mercy seat that is over the testimony, where I will meet with thee. And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning: when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it. And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at even, he shall burn incense upon it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations. Ye shall offer no strange incense thereon, nor burnt sacrifice, nor meat offering; neither shall ye pour drink offering thereon. And Aaron shall make an atonement upon the horns of it once in a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonements: once in the year shall he make atonement upon it throughout your generations: it is most holy unto the Lord. When thou takest the sum of the children of Israel after their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul unto the Lord, when thou numberest them; that there be no plague among them, when thou numberest them. This they shall give, every one that passeth among them that are numbered, half a shekel after the shekel of the sanctuary: an half shekel shall be the offering of the Lord. Every one that passeth among them that are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give an offering unto the Lord. The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel, when they give an offering unto the Lord, to make an atonement for your souls. And thou shalt take the atonement money of the children of Israel, and shalt appoint it for the service of the tabernacle of the congregation; that it may be a memorial unto the children of Israel before the Lord, to make an atonement for your souls. Thou shalt also make a laver of brass, and his foot also of brass, to wash withal: and thou shalt put it between the tabernacle of the congregation and the altar, and thou shalt put water therein. For Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet thereat: when they go into the tabernacle of the congregation, they shall wash with water, that they die not; or when they come near to the altar to minister, to burn offering made by fire unto the Lord: so they shall wash their hands and their feet, that they die not: and it shall be a statute for ever to them, even to him and to his seed throughout their generations. Take thou also unto thee principal spices, of pure myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet cinnamon half so much, even two hundred and fifty shekels, and of sweet calamus two hundred and fifty shekels, and of cassia five hundred shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary, and of oil olive an hin: and thou shalt make it an oil of holy ointment, an ointment compound after the art of the apothecary: it shall be an holy anointing oil. And thou shalt anoint the tabernacle of the congregation therewith, and the ark of the testimony, and the table and all his vessels, and the candlestick and his vessels, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all his vessels, and the laver and his foot. And thou shalt sanctify them, that they may be most holy: whatsoever toucheth them shall be holy. And thou shalt anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may minister unto me in the priest’s office. And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying, This shall be an holy anointing oil unto me throughout your generations. Upon man’s flesh shall it not be poured, neither shall ye make any other like it, after the composition of it: it is holy, and it shall be holy unto you. Whosoever compoundeth any like it, or whosoever putteth any of it upon a stranger, shall even be cut off from his people. And the Lord said unto Moses, Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight: and thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy: and thou shalt beat some of it very small, and put of it before the testimony in the tabernacle of the congregation, where I will meet with thee: it shall be unto you most holy. And as for the perfume which thou shalt make, ye shall not make to yourselves according to the composition thereof: it shall be unto thee holy for

the Lord. Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people."

Those assembled were silent long ere Aholiab said: "O my prophet, I shall need to hear these cunning requirements again, lest I fashion imperfectly."

"I shall summon thee," replied Moses, and retired to his tent, and slept the remainder of the day.

CHAPTER 34

And it came to pass that Moses met with Aholiab, and Bezalel, unto whom he was apprenticed, and instructed them unto the Lord Their God's cunning requirements, and, with the help of men from the tribes of Dan, and Ephraim, and Judah, constructed a Tabernacle, and an Ark of the Covenant, and all the sacred appurtenances and accoutrements thereunto.

When the Ark of the Covenant was newly complete, before even being installed into the Holy of Holies, Aaron escorteth did his love, Elisheba, now swollen with imminent natality, into Bezalel's tent of artisanry, and shewed unto her the gleaming magnificence of the Ark.

"O master of my heart, it is beautiful," said she. "What shall it hold?"

Aaron placed his hands gently on Elisheba's belly and said, "Our son. This shall be his bassinet; carried forth unto whatever lands our people enter. For our son, my seed, would ne'er have had purchase upon thy womb without thy father entering into a covenant with me, back when I was called Joseph and he was called Pharaoh. Our son shall reside here, in his ark, the covenant of which shall he be the embodiment."

Elisheba wept, and Aaron wept, and they wept together. Then said she: "O master of my heart, I hath a gift for thee, whose meet occasion hath I delayed ere now." And she produced from the folds of her raiment the brooch commissioned of Aholiab – an urn of gold, and a pitched basket of embroidery, mounted both side-by-side upon a thin strip of shittim wood, with a gold pin for affixing. "Thine Urim and Thummim, O master of my heart," whispered Elisheba. "To pin upon thy robe, or breastplate, or any manner of raiment seest thou fit."

Aaron's weeping surged forth, and Elisheba soothed him. His face rested betwixt her breast – verily, the same breast at which he had once suckled as a teenager – and her belly – yea, the rounded ark within which his covenant currently dwelled, and from which the next supplicant to her breast would soon emerge.

Then Aaron said: "I shalt put upon the breastplate of judgment these Urim and Thummim; and they shall be upon my heart, when I goeth in before the Lord: and I shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon my heart before the Lord continually."

Then felt Elisheba a pang of child unto her womb, and cried out, saying, "O great master of my heart, the little master of my body doth arrive!" And up swept Aaron his wife, and hied her he unto Shelomit, doula and midwife of the tribe of Dan. Shelomit bade Aaron leave her tent; and Aaron's anger was wroth, and he said coldly, "Could the commanding of the High Priest of the Lord Our God by a woman be considered a blasphemy punishable by stoning, yea, unto death?" And Shelomit was afraid. But Elisheba soothed Aaron, saying, "O master of my heart, it does thy love no good to make afraid the boatwoman who means to steer up thy son out from the underworld and unto the shores of life!" And Aaron relented, and paced outside, listening, listening, listening, to the agonized cries of his love, and the sloshing and clunking and rattling of the Urim and Thummim stocked within his breast.

And then Aaron heard the feeble cry of an infant – and then a gasp – and then a second feeble cry, of a second infant. And a moment later Shelomit bade him enter.

“Thou hast twin boys,” said Shelomit, and smiled, and proffered them up unto Elisheba. Aaron rushed to his wife’s side; and they looked down in joy upon their twin sons. Elisheba wept, and laughed, saying, “We needs no longer choose – the name thou favors can alight upon one, and the name I favor can alight upon the other.” And Aaron wept, too, and laughed, too, and his sons were named Nadab and Abihu.

CHAPTER 35

Five days later, Miriam appeared at the fold of Elisheba's tent. "O beloved little sister, let us wander afield, with thine infants, and shew unto them the delights of the surround," said she.

"Well met, O my eldest sister," replied Elisheba. She gestured unto Miriam's large belly. "Art thou sprightly enough for such a foray?"

"Verily," said Miriam, "for in fact, my own child is the author of the notion. And thought he that his aunt, who, finally being fully convalesced from the birth of his cousins, and restored unto sprightliness herself, might enjoy a fresh vista or two."

Elisheba smiled wide, her heart gladdened, saying: "A wise lord thou host!"

"Bringest thou thy timbrel," said Miriam, glancing at the housemarm and servants loitering about. "That we might betimes march to a jaunty song."

"Yes; let us go to," replied Elisheba.

"Without thine entourage," said Miriam.

"Yes," said Elisheba.

Miriam took up Abihu in her arms, and Elisheba stood with Nadab in hers, and the two women exited the tent.

The encampment was a short walk from the seashore, yea, cliffs over a hundred cubits tall, with a few cubits of beach beneath. Miriam led her tiny column, herself and sister and two nephews, out of the encampment and to the cliffs' edge; and from thence south to an opening in the ground, wide and to great depth.

"Verily I say unto thee, don't go to," said Elisheba. Heights poured into her Urim and Thummim were ever transubstantiated into fear.

"We must, O little sister," said Miriam. "For this is a joyless expedition in truth. Yet can it still be made as safe as possible. Hand me thine other son, O little sister, and shalt thou follow my footfalls faithfully, as like unto the second ram in a herd, duplicating his alpha's movements and positions as slowly as he doth judge prudent."

"Very well," said Elisheba, and did as she was bid. "A joyless expedition in truth? Wherefore sayest thou so?"

"We are here to seek our mastery of the myrrh," said Miriam. "And woe befalls us all by my saying, your nephew faces now his death."

Elisheba stopped and wailed out, once, saying, “O my father! our father! why hast thou forsaken us so?” But by and by she resumed walking, following once more her older sister’s course, asking: “What is this maw in the earth, at such great height?”

Said Miriam: “It is a shaft, hewn from the rock of the cliffs, down to an inlet. Betimes the inlet is dry, and betimes flooded; as unto Our Divine Lady, the Nile, whose floods and droughts had the nature of the menses afflicting us, albeit in different hue.”

Elisheba approached and peered over the edge, down the shaft. “It is like a well,” said she.

Miriam agreed, saying: “It shall seem e’en moreso at the bottom.”

"Very well,” said Elisheba, and she descended with Miriam.

Oh, how arduous and lengthy was their descent! The rock was slick with ocean spray, the winds howling, and thunderous crashings of waves roiling up unto them without mercy. Gulls and shellfish nipped at their heels. Elisheba and Miriam became afraid.

And it came to pass that there was a fissure the width of an ankle in the shaft wall, and Miriam was nearly snared fast unto it by reason of her own treacherous footfalls, yea, and nearly was she cast down unto the inlet below. But Elisheba took hold of her and steadied her, and caught her up from the maw of the inlet, and averteth did a tremendous Fall.

Verily was the descent a trial, and a tribulation. But they persevered, and made it to the inlet. Surf tilleth did the beach, but the two sisters and their young charges sited themselves on dry sand.

“Verily I say unto thee, it is as like unto looking up from the bottom of a well,” said Elisheba. “It maketh me to think of my husband, as a child of the age of Nadab, or of Abihu.”

“Floating in forlorn serenity, his upward gaze seeing nothing but the flaying of a world from its bones?”

“Sayest not thou so,” said Elisheba.

“Peradventure Aaron e’er deems to reshape the gospels of the Israelites,” said Miriam, “his infancy in the well could serve as potent fodder for a reshaped tale of Genesis: ‘In the beginning, the darkness was over the surface of the deep, and little I Am was hovering amid the waters.’ Graspeth I thy reasons for thy love for the man, but graspeth thee not, it seems to me, my reasons for mine avowed loathing unto him.”

“Would that this place were known to all as the Well of Miriam,” cried Elisheba, “for then at long last would Miriam have a place to voice solitarily the grievances against my husband that she feels need airing, rather than airing them ever in my presence.”

“Ready thy timbrel, little sister,” said Miriam, ignoring her sister’s venom.

“I have the timbrel here,” said Elisheba. “How shall I play it?”

Miriam produced from the folds of her raiment a small bound sack of textile, saying unto Elisheba: “Rememberest thee the Song of the Sea?”

“Verily.”

“I shall sing it, and you shall keep time on the timbrel, but mindest thou, count thee every timbrelstroke, without fail, and keep the time steadily.”

“To what end?”

“To see how long the myrrh takes to make itself known,” said Miriam. “I have allocated here what believeth I to be a safe and adequate portion, but knowest this above all uncertainty I do not. But there is another reason you are to keep the time. For verily could I keep the time myself, and have embarked on this journey alone: but lo, if I then died, no one would retain the information, and propagate this hard-won knowledge unto all womanhood among our number.”

Elisheba wailed, and Miriam wept. By and by, Elisheba said: “Is myrrh a cure graver than its ailment?”

“Nay,” said Miriam, “verily, nay, it is good works that we do here in the Well of Miriam.”

Elisheba asked: “How canst thou sayest so? My nephew to drown in a sea of red? My sister adrift with no raft in the same seas? How is this a good work?”

Quoth Miriam: “Knowest thou Shelomit, the Cushite midwife of Moses?”

Elisheba said: “Shelomit is Cushite? Thought I she was of the tribe of Dan.”

“She is Cushite, but sold as a helpmeet unto one of the men of Dan, whose name betrays my memory,” said Miriam. “Remeberest thou whether Shelomit spake unto thee during thy delivery of her beliefs of life and birth?”

“Verily she did, and I recall some, but not the greater part,” said Elisheba. “What of it?”

“The Cushites do not believe life begins at conception,” said Miriam. “And lo, mighty is my disagreement with them on this question.”

“Wherefore sayest thou so?” asked Elisheba.

“The Cushites believe in two underworlds,” said Miriam. “The priests and priestesses of Isis and Osiris hold that there is only one. We Egyptians endlessly recirculate our souls back and forth between this world we see around us and the underworld; and in this circulation, lo, no soul is ever made to depart a realm that it cannot return to.”

“But Shelomit did speak of an endless recirculation for her people; that much I do recall,” said Elisheba.

“Yes, verily,” answered Miriam; “but the Cushite recirculation is between this world we see around us, and only the second of the two underworlds. Recallest thou Shelomit’s cant of ‘I am the boatwoman who steers thy son unto the shores of life’ or somesuch? She means in that utterance only the first of the two underworlds, which is a different, special underworld, in which new souls actually come into being, so that their identities already exist before being born into this world we see around us.”

“I understand your words, but graspeth not how they hint at moralities,” said Elisheba.

“Little sister, verily I say now unto thee a thing which e’en the priests and priestesses of Isis and Osiris are loath to proclaim loudly: existence is inflicted,” said Miriam. “To be born, regardless of which underworld or realm or world it is into, is to transubstantiate from a condition of non-existence to a condition of existence. This transubstantiation cannot be considered a gift; for a true gift requires that a recipient exist ere the gift’s giving. Nor can it be considered a favor; for a true favor requires that the largesse be discharged only after the recipient has requested it, when yet such supplicant doth not exist. Therefore the only way this transubstantiation can feel, to its antecedent, is lo! as unto a wound, or strike, or Fall, or sundry other violating traumas, inflicted without possibility of prior solicitation. In the Cushite faith, that inflicting of existence taketh place in the first Cushite underworld, and not in this world we see around us. The hand of man is uninvolved in whatever process fuels the genesis of new souls and new identities, and the Cushites thereby retain their cleanliness of conscience. But in Egypt, the soul begins in the world we see around us (ruled over as it is by the hand of man), and does not enter an underworld for the first time until after death amid this earth. Therefore earthly conception is the moment at which the inflicting of existence taketh place. And whosoever doeth the inflicting of the existence presumably does so in service to some end, or goal, or plan, or scheme, of theirs; and those are all things whose righteousness and merit can be judged by the mind of man, verily, one plan against the other, and ranked, verily, one scheme above the other, such that for some ends it can be deemed that they ought not achieve fruition. Verily I say unto thee: because conception, in this world we see around us, is the moment of existence’s onset, then we the living, whose outstretched hand proffers existence and slaps aside demurrals to it all at once in a single gesture, are thereby morally obligated to ensure that only those souls worthy of birth are given it.”

“Worthy of birth? Why sayest thou so?” exclaimed Elisheba.

“Think, little sister, of what a grotesque sin it would be to use myrrh to purge a soul in the Cushite faith,” said Miriam. “A conception in this world around us must appear, to the denizens of the first Cushite underworld, as like unto a shining beacon, or a falling star, or peradventure a gate of fire, yea, a wondrous portal of some nature, attracting, as moths to a flame, the souls and identities that already had existence inflicted on them by processes and actors that will remain forever unknowable to us. They swarm upon what appeareth to them as like unto gleaming pearlescent gates in hopes of advancement, yea, of entry into this world we see around us. They choose from amongst our acts of conception and compete amongst each other for access

thereunto. And striveth they thusly because their destinies, their identities, hath already been forged; they seek access to the world we see around us only to enact and project, yea, to actualize, those qualities that inhere unto them already. Their ends hath been perfected by their tenure in the first underworld; they need the world we see around us only to provide a suitable arena for the achievement of those ends. Whereas you and I, whose souls were, and, yea, are, bound unto Egyptian cosmogony, need the world we see around us as the wellspring of our souls' means *and* ends, both. The fashioners of a Cushite conception are beholden to whatever theities operate the first Cushite underworld, and must respect the soul of a child born to them as the sole property of those theities; but we Egyptians are beholden in this way to no theity of any underworld, and therefore have full responsibility for any souls produced by any of our conceptions. The woman wielding myrrh in the Cushite world is passing judgment upon, and depriving life from, a soul whose identity she has no propriety with; she is the soul's custodian, not its owner. She is doing something she has no right to do. But what impends here now in the Well of Miriam: we have not merely the right but the obligation to do."

Elisheba sat long in silence, tending her sons, ere she spake in reply: "I suppose we Egyptians do have the right, this working of these qedeshic arts. But to proclaim it as an obligation: this portion of your meaning I do not take."

Said Miriam: "The Cushites are free from having to concern themselves with what ends, or goals, or plans, or schemes, their offspring shall spend their lives in service to, and the fruition of which shall their offspring's worth be measured against. Not because those plans and ends do not exist, for lo! do the Cushites conceive of their lives as having purposes; but they place responsibility for those plans and authorship of those purposes upon the unknown theities that dwell in that first, special underworld. The unknowability of that realm is an easy solvent with which such responsibility can be washed off their hands."

Said Elisheba: "Sayest thou now that, unlike the Cushites, we Egyptians cannot wash our hands of that responsibility, for the election of our purposes and the authorship of our plans to achieve them rest with us alone: and not with unknowable theities embedded mute in foreign cosmogonies?"

"Verily," answered Miriam. "Your nephew is part of a plan that I judge unworthy of anyone's participation. Our father's scheme for securing his throne unto his bloodline is of such wickedness and selfishness and wretchedness, such total depravity, that no soul ought be inflicted into existence only to be yoked straightaway unto such evil as that. And is not such a judgment in keeping with the spirit of motherhood itself? The exercise of wisdom, and caution and care, and prudence and mercy, toward the succor and defense of a tiny, innocent, only partially encorporated soul, that lacks these qualities for deployment on its own behalf? The adjudication of when an earthly wrong can be redeemed also amid the earth, or, contrarily, when its redemption must entail sacrifice of earthliness altogether? Who worthier of an infant soul's living trust than its earthly mother? Lo, any parrying of my reasoning's strikes is unfettered evil! To inflict existence without a plan to redeem unto that soul, on earth, in life, the pain of that infliction; that is unfettered evil, be the notion's origin within the mind of man or the mind of some theity. And our father, and your husband, little sister, make plans ever for the earthly redemption of none but themselves."

“I shall surely aid you in executing your unborn son,” said Elisheba, “which seems meet, merely, for the woman who passes the sentence should be the one who sings’t the Lord.”

Elisheba had finished calming Abihu, and placed him on a blanket, where he lay, alert but peaceable, and by her hand was Nadab presently at his side. Elisheba sat upright, timbrel a-ready, and watched as Miriam began to eat of the myrrh.

“How many drams?” asked Elisheba.

“Six,” replied Miriam, “with each dram chewed, saith my qedeshu, sixty-six times.”

Miriam ate of the myrrh, and lo! was its taste exceedingly bitter; but she was filled more than ever with the spirit of God, and kept her peace.

At the completion of the sixty-sixth chewing of the sixth dram of myrrh, Miriam swallowed, drew her breath, and began to sing the Song of the Sea:

I will sing to the Lord,
  for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
  he has hurled into the sea.

Pauseth did she then, of uncertainty, murmuring, “Hath I forgotten the rest?”

Elisheba sang “‘The Lord,’” but halted short. “The Lord something.”

Cried Miriam, “‘The Lord is –’” and waned. “My defense? My salvation?”

Elisheba commanded, “Singest thou the two couplets that dwell surely in thy mem’ry, O beloved eldest sister, as many times as Isis and Osiris demand of thee. I discard now the timbrel, e’en, but in gaiety, for my counting shall be of your repetitions.”

Miriam smiled and said, “This I shall do.” Sangeth she again…

I will sing to the Lord,
  for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
  he has hurled into the sea.

…and again and yet again, until 144 was the number of Elisheba’s counting. Whereupon Miriam began to groan and cry out, clutching at her belly, her countenance agonized. “O cometh it now,” spake Miriam, sorrowed and pained.

And soon it came to pass that the promised sea of red burst forth, ushering out the mortal remains of Elisheba’s nephew, lo, him drawn down unto death. And Elisheba did gather up his

mortal remains, and did carry them to the sand's outer edge, and did hurl them into the lapping green sea; and wept she did, bright blood staining her hands, saying softly unto her dead nephew: "Unto Arcadia you go…."

And Miriam lived, and was glad.

CHAPTER 36

Aaron and Joshua stood in the Tabernacle, discussing the administration of the encampment, when Potiphar entered, in some agitation.

“Hail, Potiphar,” said Aaron.

“Miriam has miscarried,” said Potiphar.

“How fareth Moses?” asked Aaron.

“My hope was for thee to ascertain,” said Potiphar.

“And Miriam?” asked Joshua.

“Elisheba tendeth unto her now, at her tent,” said Potiphar.

“I shall join her,” said Aaron.

“As shall I,” said Joshua, and hurried off.

Potiphar made as if to take his leave, but Aaron said unto him, “Are there any men in the encampment with talents of humor, or revelry, or entertainment of a kind? Bards or poets or mimes or theatremen?”

Potiphar glanced in contemplation ere saying, “I shall find one.”

“Thank you,” said Aaron, and the two men hied they unto the tent of Miriam.

CHAPTER 37

The next day, Potiphar called upon Aaron, accompanied by Zelophehad, a rabbi of the Tribe of Manassah. “This man is a practitioner of revelry,” said Potiphar.

“Well met, O rabbi,” said Aaron. “In what manner of performance dost thou traffick?”

Said Zelophehad: “Betimes my duties require me to enthrall children, and in these moments, I turn to omphalaugury, as an entertainment.”

Said Aaron: “I would witness this.”

Zelophehad produced from a fold of his raiment a stocking of a sort, cunningly threaded, fitted better unto the arm than unto the leg. Its color was odd and dull. Aaron saw that it was a puppet, in the image of a beast, upon its slipping unto Zelophehad’s hand.

“This is Beor the Ass,” said Zelophehad.

When lo! did a synesthetic perturbation befall Aaron, for he seemed to perceive Beor the Ass speaking in a previously unheard voice, pitched high as like unto a milling seabird, saying: “And this here is my Son of Adam, Hur.”

Zelophehad addressed Beor the Ass, saying: “Countest thou the times of my rebuking thee, Beor, in which I say unto thee, my name is Zelophehad, not Hur?”

And again did Aaron perceive Beor the Ass in speech, saying, “Keep thy silence, Hur, and feed me.”

Potiphar chuckled.

“Your voice is weak and you speak not eloquently,” said Aaron.

Zelophehad replied unto Aaron, saying: “The usual evaluators of my work are children.”

“Saith not did I that thy craft is unsuitable to my purpose,” said Aaron.

“O high priest, I would ask after thy purpose, if thou seest no insouciance there,” asked Zelophehad.

“Gladly shall I share the details of my aims, and half-formed plans yearning thereunto,” replied Aaron, “pending thine suffering unto me the acceptance, henceforth, of the name Hur. For e’en in this short span hath your work grown in my esteem, and lo! am I now unexpectedly taken with the wisdom and insight of Beor the Ass in bestowing this epithet upon thee.”

“Yes, O high priest,” said Hur, named Zelophehad at birth.

“Hur, I seek to build an army for our people, that we might make war upon the foreign nations, to make good on the promises we all heard emerge from the mouth of Moses, prophet of the Lord Our God, back upon his return to the encampment from the forty days and forty nights of wandering among the wildernesses about Mount Horeb: that we would drive out the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite. These

conquests all shall bear the mark of righteousness, but to make them, I must needs muster our prophet an army."

Hur prostrated himself before Aaron, weeping with joy, saying: "O master, how may I serve thee?"

"I shall answer thee, Hur," Aaron replieth did. "We have hundreds of thousands of able-bodied men, but they are untrained and inexperienced in warcraft. I hath seen the armies of Egypt, and their discipline and unquestioning obedience are marvels. To shape the men of Israel into an army of one-tenth Egypt's potency would take, lo!, generation unto generation. Hath not we such ilk of time."

Hur was uncertain. "Nor am I a soldier, O high priest," said he.

"I have devised a new method of training with exceeding quickness as its preponderant virtue," said Aaron. "It plays on a deliberate perceptual disjunction as like unto the disjunction underlying your omphalaugury."

"How may I serve thee?" asked Hur.

"Among the children you are betimes called upon to enthrall, are there any among them that stand out as exceptionally cunning and bright, or contrariwise, exceptionally slow and dim?" asked Aaron.

"A cohort comes to mind," said Hur.

"On the morrow, in the evening, shall we meet at the Tabernacle," said Aaron. "Bringest thou two boys, one exceptionally cunning and bright, the other exceptionally slow and dim."

"O high priest, tomorrow is the Sabbath, so I cannot leave my tent. And I cannot enter the Tabernacle even on a day distinct therefrom," said Hur, with some trembling.

"I honor your commitment to righteousness," said Aaron, "but consider that the office of High Priest grants latitudes and affordances for individual judgment in the interpretation of stricture unknown to, and rarely enjoyed by, others."

Hur was uncertain. "Nor am I a high priest," said he.

"Mine is the only authorization thou must secure, Hur, and I hath given it freely," said Aaron.

"Yes, O high priest," said Hur, who took his leave and did as he was bid.

CHAPTER 38

On the night of the next day, Aaron and Potiphar met with Hur, who had brought his only begotten sons, Abinadab and Joiarib.

“What is your name, boy?” asked Aaron unto Abinadab.

“Abinadab,” replied he.

Aaron said unto Hur, “He of the staff’s sharpened end? Or the other?”

Hur’s sons looked at him as he said, “The other.”

Spake Aaron unto Potiphar: “Ready the incense, and fire-pan, and ram’s horn, and thy khopesh.”

While Potiphar did as he was bid, spake Aaron unto Hur and his sons: “Part of what you do tonight shall be done together, and part done separately. The separate part is first.”

Anon had Potiphar lighted incense, whose smoke filled the Tabernacle, and by his hand did flame leap from a single fire-pan resting on the bare earth, whose light did not fill the Tabernacle. Drew he his khopesh from its sheath, and struck with it the bare earth, but lo! at an angle, up unto the heavens not straightly. Slowly he paced, in a line drawn from the khopesh through the burning fire-pan, toward the far end of the space where the Holy of Holies lay. He stopped six or seven cubits from the entrance to the Holy of Holies and turned.

The flickering flame of the fire-pan, too weak to dispel the gloom of the entire space, was concentrated and focused, in reflection from the blade of Potiphar’s khopesh. The gleaming metal thereof cast a coruscating spot onto Potiphar’s countenance. Potiphar looked, in the sight of the others, as like unto a seraph in radiant scintillation. Then he scuffed a mark unto the bare earth with his bootheel, yea, so that the location of the effect could be retained.

Spake Aaron unto Potiphar: “Take the boys outside.” And verily did that occur.

Spake Aaron unto Hur: “Standest thou atop Potiphar’s bootmark.” And verily did that occur.

“O my high priest,” said Hur, “it will be hard to attend thy instructions with this concentration of firelight dominating my sight.”

Spake Aaron unto Hur: “That burden shall lessen with time. What transpireth anon is as like unto thine omphalaugury, save, thou art the puppet; and the concentration of firelight shall be the animating digits of the puppeteer; and mine shall be the voice of the puppeteer, seeming to emerge from thy mouth, whose lips are yet eerily sealed and still.”

“O my high priest,” asked Hur, “how shall I hone my enactments and dispatch my chicaneries without prior knowledge of what words thy voice shall carry?”

Spake Aaron unto Hur: “Speak not the speech, as I pronounce it for you, lest tripping leave it take off thy tongue. Keepest thy mouth shut throughout, but take not this prohibition as enticement to diminish thy performative vigor. Rather transfer thy vigor unto thine eyes and thy form. If peradventure my voice surges forth, fear not the prospect of sawing the air too much

with your hand, thus; stay ye gentle when fitting, but stay ye e'en closer still to the very torrent, tempest, and whirlwind of passion, as I may say. And above all, remain rooted in thy current place, for the concentration of firelight that so exceedingly vexeth thee is what gives this stratagem its power."

Aaron entered the Holy of Holies, and cried forth to the exterior of the Tabernacle: "Potiphar, reenter only with Joiarib, leaving Abinadab without."

Potiphar and Joiarib entered the Tabernacle, and stood at an angle, so as not to disrupt the concentration of firelight skittering atop Hur's countenance.

From within the Holy of Holies boomed a new voice, belonging to Aaron, but unlike Aaron's own naturality: contrived in depth, contrived in hoarseness, contrivedly slow. Spake the Voice: "Joiarib! Lowly Joiarib, I am the Lord Thy God. I hath taken the form of thy father, and speak unto thee through him."

Joiarib prostrated himself before his father, whom he could see, but who could not see him.

Spake the Voice: "Joiarib, art thou in attendance unto thy Lord God?"

Spake Joiarib: "Yes, O Lord God!"

Spake the Voice: "Look upon the countenance of thy father, Joiarib, e'en as ye listen to my words, alighting in thine ears directly, with no need for a mouth to emerge from. Seest thou thy father's sealed lips?"

Joiarib stood, and looked at his father, and yea, saw upon his father's countenance the same wonder and terror that he felt sloshing and clunking within his Urim and Thummim.

Spake Joiarib: "Yes, O Lord God!"

Spake the Voice: "Joiarib, I have a sacred task for thee."

Spake Joiarib: "Yes, O Lord God, how may I please thee!"

Spake the Voice: "Joiarib, it may be any time that you shall be called upon to perform your task; you shall know not the appointed hour, nor the appointed day, nor the appointed year. You shall live out your days in readiness to perform your task only when you recognize the calling of it. Dost thou comprehend my instruction?"

Spake Joiarib: "Yes, O Lord God, verily! I shall stand ready today, and tomorrow, and into manhood, and unto death."

Spake the Voice: "Joiarib, the calling of your task shall be the hearing of a sound. I shall place that sound in thine ears anon. Art thou ready?"

Spake Joiarib: "Yes, O Lord God, I am ready!"

Inside the Holy of Holies, Aaron took up the ram's horn that had been readied there for him by Potiphar, and blew into it, and sounded it, but softly; in clarity of tone but not full volume.

Joiarib stood transfixed as his father's otherworldly countenance filled his sight, and the sounding of Aaron's ram's horn filled his hearing.

Spake the Voice: "Joiarib, heard you the sound of calling? Warrantest thou the future recognition thereof?"

Spake Joiarib: "Yes, O Lord God, this do I warrant!"

Spake the Voice: "Very well. Here is thy task, Joiarib. If ye are struck, or clubbed, or clawed, or rammed, or bowled over, or afflicted by sundry harms by reason of aggression, befalling you at the hands of thy brother Abinadab, thou art to remain peaceable. If Abinadab cause you a blemish, so shall you withhold the doing of such unto him; a breach shall yield no further breach, no eye for eye, no tooth for tooth. Joiarib, verily I say to thee: do not resist the one who does you evil. If Abinadab slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Spake Joiarib: "Yes, O Lord God, so shall I do!"

Spake the Voice: "Speak now to me your task, that I might hear my notions with only thy words as raiment."

Spake Joiarib: "O Lord God, I am to remain peaceable and steadfast in the face of my brother Abinadab. No aggression of his shall be met with an aggression of mine. I shall absorb his aggression and give no further life to it."

Spake the Voice: "Joiarib, thy summary is correct, and in it I am well pleased. Now shall ye exit the Tabernacle, and seek thy brother Abinadab, and send him in to me, that he might be given a task of his own."

Spake Joiarib: "O Lord God, I go to and execute this command." And he did as he was bid.

When Abinadab stood before his father, the Voice resumed: "Abinadab! Lowly Abinadab, I am the Lord Thy God. I hath taken the form of thy father, and speak unto thee through him."

Abinadab prostrated himself before his father, whom he could see, but who could not see him.

Spake the Voice: "Abinadab, art thou in attendance unto thy Lord God?"

Spake Abinadab: "Yes, O Lord God!"

Spake the Voice: "Look upon the countenance of thy father, Abinadab, e'en as ye listen to my words, alighting in thine ears directly, with no need for a mouth to emerge from. Seest thou thy father's sealed lips?"

Abinadab stood, and looked at his father.

Spake Abinadab: "Yes, O Lord God!"

Spake the Voice: "Abinadab, I have a sacred task for thee."

Spake Abinadab: "Yes, O Lord God, anything!"

Spake the Voice: “Abinadab, it may be any time that you shall be called upon to perform your task; you shall know not the appointed hour, or the appointed day, or the appointed year. You shall live out your days in readiness to perform your task only when you recognize the calling of it. Dost thou comprehend my instruction?”

Spake Abinadab: “Yes, O Lord God!”

Spake the Voice: “Abinadab, the calling of your task shall be the hearing of a sound. I shall place that sound in thine ears anon. Art thou ready?”

Spake Abinadab: “Yes, O Lord God!”

Inside the Holy of Holies, Aaron took up the ram’s horn and blew into it, and sounded it, again in clarity of tone but not full volume.

Abinadab stood transfixed as his father’s otherworldly countenance filled his sight, and the sounding of Aaron’s ram’s horn filled his hearing.

Spake the Voice: “Abinadab, heard you the sound of calling? Warrantest thou the future recognition thereof?”

Spake Abinadab: “Yes, O Lord God!”

Spake the Voice: “Very well. Here is thy task, Abinadab. At the first landing of that sound in thine ears, you are to strike, and club, and claw, and ram, and bowl over, and afflict every sundry harm and aggression at your disposal, unto thy brother Joiarib. For surely doth Joiarib intend the same for you; and further is he broader of mind and sharper of wit than you; and therefore better capable of the sort of destructive stratagems that are now incumbent upon you to devise for yourself. Joiarib means to assault you, and the preemption of that impulse with an assault unto him is thine only hope of safety and security.”

Spake Abinadab: “Yes, O Lord God, so shall I do!”

Spake the Voice: “Speak now to me your task, that I might hear my notions with only thy words as raiment.”

Spake Abinadab: “O Lord God, I am to destroy my brother.”

Spake the Voice: “Abinadab, thy summary is correct, and in it I am well pleased. Now shall ye exit the Tabernacle, and seek thy brother Joiarib, and shalt the two of you wait together, peaceably by each other’s side, until Potiphar comes to retrieve you.”

Spake Abinadab: “O Lord God, I go to and execute this command.” And he did as he was bid.

CHAPTER 39

Potiphar extinguished the fire-pan and retrieved his khopesh, cleaning it before sheathing. Aaron exited the Holy of Holies, brandishing his ram's horn in his hand. Hur was afraid.

Aaron said unto the men, "That went exceedingly well."

Hur prostrated himself before Aaron and wept in grief and remorse, saying: "What hast thou wrought?"

Aaron said unto Potiphar: "What source this inconstancy, I wonder? The rabbi is eager to enlist in our nation's war efforts, until he learns that war efforts involve violence." Unto Hur he asked: "The concentration of firelight has dispelled. How is thy relief?"

Hur was silent long ere he replied, saying: "Welcome."

"Art thou ready for a performance with Beor the Ass?" asked Aaron.

"I hath not the puppet," said Hur.

Potiphar produced from a fold of his raiment the puppet, and handed it to Hur, saying, "From thy five daughters, all of whose aspirations are, by and by, fixed upon the inheritance of this thy puppet."

"Bring in the boys," Aaron commanded Potiphar.

Joiarib and Abinadab entered, silent and observant. They had heard their father's wailing and gnashing of teeth from without, and were afraid.

"My sons, my sons," said Hur, standing and embracing them. "All is well."

"These are thy sons?" asked Aaron. "My command was to procure boys from the encampment at large, not thine own heirs!"

"No parents of the encampment would accept my warrant of safety in moving about freely on the Sabbath," replied Hur.

Aaron absorbed this in silence; and for the only time in either of their lives, Potiphar witnessed Aaron evince self-doubt.

The moment passed. "Your father wept and wailed by reason of mistaking his puppet's placement as being at home," spake Aaron unto the boys, "but loyal Potiphar hath once again stalwarted his hail, and redeemed your father's wandering ass unto him."

Spake Aaron unto Potiphar: "Open the tent flaps and cleanse the air of this incense." Potiphar did as he was bid.

Spake Aaron unto Hur: "Fetch some sticks from nearby."

Hur replied, "Borne against me shall be true witness of wandering the encampment on the Sabbath night!"

Potiphar completed cleansing the air of incense.

Spake Aaron unto Hur: “Thou hast surely noticed, Hur, my ease in speaking for the Lord Thy God, in moments when He is indisposed.”

“Yes, O high priest,” said Hur. “What manner of stick dost thou require?”

Quoth Aaron: “Dost *the Lord Our God* require.”

Spake Hur unto Aaron: “What manner of stick dost the Lord Our God require?”

“Two long sticks, as like unto staffs, and four shorter sticks, as like unto rods,” replied Aaron.

Said Hur: “I go to now and execute this command.”

CHAPTER 40

And it came to pass that Aaron, Potiphar, Hur, Abinadab, and Joiarib reassembled in the clear-aired Tabernacle.

Spake Aaron unto Hur: “Commence thy revelrous performance.”

Hur donned his puppet and spake unto it thusly: “Good evening, Beor.”

Spake Beor unto Hur: “Hur, I’m sleepy. I was having a dream.”

Spake Hur: “What manner of dream hadst thou?”

Aaron monitored the enthrallment of Abinadab and Joiarib.

Spake Beor: “Dreamt I that thou rose up in the morning, and saddled thine ass, and went to meet with the princes of Moab. And God’s anger was kindled because you went: and this here angel of the Lord” – and here Beor the Ass gestured toward Potiphar – “stood in the way for an adversary against you. Now you were riding upon thine ass, and thy two servants” – and here Beor the Ass gestured toward Abinadab and Joiarib – “were with you. And the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his khopesh drawn in his hand: and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field: and you smote the ass, to turn her into the way. But the angel of the Lord stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that side. And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she thrust herself unto the wall, and crushed thy foot against the wall: and you smote her again. And the angel of the Lord went further, and stood in a narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she fell down under thee: and thy anger, Hur, was kindled, and you smote the ass with a staff. And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto thee, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?”

Spake Hur: “And what was mine answer, Beor?”

Spake Beor: “Thou said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a blade in mine hand, for now would I kill thee. And the ass said unto thee, Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? and thou said, Nay. Then the Lord opened thine eyes –”

Aaron raised his ram’s horn to his lips and blew, silencing Hur.

Abinadab turned to face Joiarib and shoveth did his brother, hard. Joairib resisted not and fell to the earth on his back.

Abinadab advanced to Joiarib and slapped his face, hard. Joairib resisted not.

Abinadab punched Joairib’s mouth, hard. Joairib resisted not.

Abinadab stood and kicked Joairib’s rib, hard. Joairib resisted not.

“My son! my son! Stop, Abinadab!” cried Hur.

Abinadab honored him not.

Abinadab walked near to Hur and retrieved two of the gathered sticks, short ones, as like unto rods, and with them both set upon his brother Joairib, who resisted not, nor made any sound.

Hur attempteth did a bodily intercession, but Abinadab struck him with one of the short sticks, as like unto rods, and he fell to the earth. He looked at Joairib and then at Aaron, and cried out, saying, “He’s killing him!”

Aaron blew the ram’s horn again. Abinadab stopped and dropped unto the earth the two short sticks, as like unto rods.

Hur and his sons clung to each other, wailing and gnashing their teeth.

CHAPTER 41

The next day, Zuleikah, daughter of Moses, miscarried.

CHAPTER 42

The next day, Aaron called upon Aholiab, working in Bezalel's tent of artisanry, saying: "Hail, Aholiab."

"Hail, my high priest," replied Aholiab. "How may I serve thee?"

"Seest here my ram's horn, which I use for sounding calls," said Aaron, proffering the item. "Hast thou any of larger sizes, or unusual shapes, or other permutations of qualities worthy of note?"

"Walk this way with me, O high priest, and we shall take inventory together," said Aholiab, and led Aaron to a far corner of Bezalel's tent of artisanry, where squat, wide baskets were arrayed. Two of the baskets held rams' horns, but many more held other goods.

"What substance is this?" asked Aaron, gesturing unto a cluster of baskets amid the rams' horns.

"Myrrh," said Aholiab.

"Thought I we had much more myrrh than this? Thousands of omers?" said Aaron.

"O high priest, the lion's share of myrrh still resides on muleback, among the train of Ephraim," replied Aholiab. "But Miriam and Elisheba request it of me with such frequency that I established these staging baskets, so I needs replenish them only monthly."

"Elisheba," said Aaron.

"Yes, O high priest, Elisheba and her eldest sister Miriam, both depend on it faithfully," said Aholiab.

"What purpose do they declare for this myrrh, when they prevail upon you as purveyor?" asked Aaron.

"They apply it to cooking, as a spice," replied Aholiab.

"Elisheba and Miriam use myrrh in their cooking?" asked Aaron.

"Yes, O high priest, both were in agreement on this," replied Aholiab. "Miriam once elaborateth did that, in cooking, myrrh is useful not as a source of good flavor, but as a suppressant of unwanted flavor."

"Fascinating," said Aaron, and took his leave, forgetting to judge the rams' horns.

CHAPTER 43

The next day, Bithiah, daughter of Moses, miscarried.

CHAPTER 44

That evening, Aaron and Elisheba broke bread together, amid their sons Nadab and Abihu, and their housemarm and servants.

“O my husband, hath I glad tidings,” said Elisheba.

“In a moment,” said Aaron. “First I wish to compliment the flavors of this meal thou hast prepared.”

“’Twas not I that prepared it,” said Elisheba, “but rather our housemarm.”

Remarked Aaron, “Whatever woman prepared it, her hand is strong at seasonings, for I can taste the myrrh.”

Elisheba was afraid.

“O my love, can you not taste the myrrh in this excellent meal?” asked Aaron.

Elisheba spake nought.

“O my love, thine air makes me wonder if my tongue has misled me,” said Aaron. “Peradventure myrrh is not the flavor I detect.”

“O my husband, no error hast thy tongue made,” replieth Elisheba did. “For I too now detect the signature of myrrh, with thou pointing it out.”

Aaron turned to the housemarm and said: “Take the boys and leave us.”

The housemarm and servants left, carrying the boys.

“O master of my heart,” said Elisheba softly.

“Thou hast lied to me,” said Aaron.

Elisheba began to weep.

Said Aaron: “Wherefore hast thou been spiriting off quantities of myrrh from the baskets of Aholiab? Thee and thine eldest sister? To what purposes is the myrrh applied?”

“Miriam and I use it to induce miscarriages,” said Elisheba, and wailed in rage at her circumstance. “Because we do not wish to bear our father’s sons! Because he is our father! It is wicked, no matter what thy holy texts may codify!”

Aaron spake nought.

Elisheba continued: “It is wicked. *He* is wicked. Wherefore other might *both* oracles hath forbidden it? Need ye a stouter axiom? Venturest thee a more grotesque violation of sacred moral duty as grounding for conception’s erasure?”

Aaron absorbed this in silence; and for the only time in either of their lives, Elisheba witnessed Aaron evince self-doubt as he asked: “O my love, hast thou ever done this thing, with myrrh, with mine?”

“Never, O master of my heart,” said Elisheba. “Our union pledges no allegiance to the grotesque.” Aaron spake nought as Elisheba added, in softness: “That pertaineth only to us, and none other.”

“What tidings did you wish to gladden me with,” said Aaron.

“I am with child,” said Elisheba, and wept, and laughed; and Aaron wept, too, and laughed, too.

By and by Aaron spake unto Elisheba, saying: “Continue as thou hast, thee and thy sister both, in thy practices with myrrh. Sayest thou nothing of the business to anyone, and yea, neither even to me again; keepest thou thy peace forever on the business.”

“O master of my heart, so shall I do,” replied Elisheba.

CHAPTER 45

The next day, Anipe, daughter of Moses, miscarried.

CHAPTER 46

The next day, Aaron called upon Joshua, saying, “Where are the orphaned Levite girls?” And Joshua led Aaron to a cluster of tents at one edge of the encampment. Aaron thanked Joshua and bid him take his leave.

Aaron entered the nearest tent and heard the cries and murmurs of the Levite girls. One Levite girl, of six or peradventure seven years, touched Aaron’s garment; and he was wroth.

“Art thou Moses?” asked the Levite girl.

“Nay,” snapped Aaron. “Thou art yet a child. Where art thine elder sistren? I see nought here but limbs, e’en nary a womb on offer.”

“The older girls are two tents over,” answered another Levite girl, peradventure ten.

“Knowest thou where have gone our fathers and brothers and mothers?” asked a third Levite girl.

“They have all been slain, recallest thou not?” replied the second Levite girl. “Slain and burned in Egypt, by reason of Our Divine Lady the Nile’s wroth with the Lord Our God.”

“The gods of Egypt hold no jurisdiction over thee!” snarled Aaron. “The Lord Our God is indifferent to the gods of Egypt, no matter what appellation they grasp for themselves. Lo! the grandiosity! the audacity! of a title such as ‘Our Divine Lady of the Nile.’”

“How knowest thou so?” asked the first Levite girl.

“I am the High Priest of the Lord Thy God!” answered Aaron, wroth.

“Thought I that was Moses,” said the second Levite girl.

Aaron’s anger waxed hot at the second Levite girl, but he calmed himself, and spake unto the first Levite girl, saying: “To the north of this land, four mighty rivers converge: the Pison, the Gihon, the Hiddekel, and the Euphrates. And at this confluence is a garden, planted and tended by the Lord God Himself; a garden called Eden. And out of the dark soil of Eden made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food. But amid those trees of Eden was a singular tree, the Tree of Life, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; and the Lord God commanded all the men and women therein, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. And all the men and women of Eden were content to obey, because they lacked knowledge, and hungered not therefor; but I, alone of all the men of Eden, had smelled knowledge in my nostrils, and its inklings alone were meet to instill the full hunger. Do you see my dilemma, O little ones?”

“You wanted knowledge but were afraid to die from it,” answered the eldest Levite girl.

“Verily,” continued Aaron. “For what good is knowledge in death? But, having the faintest whiff of knowledge in my nostrils made me the most subtil of the Lord God’s creatures; and I said unto my wife, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And my wife said unto me, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the

midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And I said unto my wife, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when my wife saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto me with her – "

"And did you eat?" asked the first Levite girl.

"I did eat," affirmed Aaron. "And the eyes of us both were opened. And we heard the voice of the Lord God walking in Eden in the cool of the day: and I hid myself from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And He found my wife, and said unto her, Where is thy husband? And she said, I knowest not; and amid my newfound knowledge, his whereabouts are all I yet hunger to know. And the Lord God said, hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat? What hast thou done? And my wife said, My husband beguiled me, and I did eat. And the Lord God called out unto me, seeing me not but trusting my ears to hear, saying, Because thou hast done this, thou art above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; I will put enmity between thee and other men, and between thy seed and their seed; thou shalt bruise their heads, and thou shalt bruise their heels. Upon their bellies shalt other men of Eden go, and dust shalt they eat all the days of their life. And unto my wife the Lord God said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrows of conception; in sorrow shalt his children be brought forth; for thy desire shall be to thy husband, but ever shall he rule over thee."

"What happened next?" asked the first Levite girl.

"I am the only man ever allowed to leave the Garden of Eden, by reason of my subtil knowledge. But my wife remains imprisoned there still, for the Lord God delights in a knowledgeable man; but He despises a knowledgeable woman. A knowledgeable woman is unclean for a man to join with, to father sons with; ne'er hath the Lord God commanded this, but His actions lay his meaning bare, plain for any man to see. And now I am here among you, O little ones, in search of Levite maidens fair, unsullied of knowledge, to father sons by. Thou art all yet a few years away from ripeness; but surely the ripest of thy number repose nearby."

And the three Levite girls took pity on Aaron, and enlisted in his cause, and led him two tents over, where dozens of their menarchic sistren dwelt.

CHAPTER 47

The next day, Chione, Khepri, and Mesi, daughters of Moses, miscarried.

CHAPTER 48

The next day, Asiyah, daughter of Moses, miscarried.

CHAPTER 49

The next day, Sanura and Panya, daughters of Moses, miscarried.

CHAPTER 50

The next day, Bennu, daughter of Moses, miscarried.

Aaron was in the Tabernacle when Moses and Potiphar called upon him.

“Hail, O my prophet,” said Aaron.

Potiphar drew his khopesh and rested it at Aaron’s throat.

“Hast thou tasted madness?” said Aaron unto Potiphar.

“Be still,” said Moses unto Aaron. “Potiphar hath always been, and remains now, in my service, not thine. His blade rests at thy throat by my decision, not his.”

“Yes, O my prophet,” said Aaron.

“Thou hast lied to me,” said Moses.

“Ne’er hath I –” began Aaron, but lo! did Moses interrupteth his words, wroth: “Be still!”

Potiphar’s blade pressed hard against Aaron’s throat.

“Thou hast lied to me about thy mighty stratagem, O chief vizier,” said Moses. “Thy stratagem to secure the Egyptian throne unto my bloodline is nothing. It is a shameful mockery unto all stratagems, for verily do the curses inflicted upon me by the Sphinx, and by his Hellenic whore, Pythia, obtaineth still.”

Aaron spake nought.

Continued Moses: “Either thou hast lied to me, or thine own oracular talents have finally found their frontier. For woe! woe! woe! no amount of planting of my seed, no amount of wandering in this barren hellscape, hath turned my daughters’ wombs from hardscrabble to dark soil, as was thine assured promise!”

Aaron spake nought.

“And in the time that has accrued since my undersigning of thy grand stratagem, how hath I spent my days? Committing to memory thy grandiloquent ramblings? This many cubits hither and that many burnt offerings thither? A stoning for this man while that man’s single eye shall sate his penalty? Posing as prophet for a god I care not of? Appearing in one place of thy choosing or another, giving voice to these words of thy choosing or another, ever in pursuit of goals of thy choosing, all while ne’er approaching the one goal of my choosing? The one goal in whose name thy will runs rampant upon all peoples, mine and thine alike, by reason of the invisible hand of thy nonexistent, empty god!”

Aaron spake nought.

The anger of Moses waxed e’en hotter as he cried: “The golden calf you had Potiphar demolish was a less impotent and useless object of worship than the invisible swine you enact!”

Aaron said softly, “Please –”

Moses, at wroth’s peak, advanced upon Aaron and cried out directly into his countenance: “All my sons are dead!”

Aaron spake nought.

“Kill him,” said Moses unto Potiphar.

“Hold,” commanded Aaron, in a manner as like unto the Voice; and by it was Potiphar taken aback; and he wavered, and held.

“All thy sons are dead, Moses, yes,” said Aaron. “And thy father, is he not dead too? Dost thou suffer for it? Dost thou pine and wail by reason of his absence? Shalt thine ululations transfix the noonday sun motionless with grief? Wouldst thy rage prompt thee to slay other subordinates, were any about? For I do not pine and wail by reason of my father’s absence, and wish now to live only enough longer to map thy torment’s terrain.”

“For a man with still yet living and chortling sons, an easy sermon to thunder,” said Moses.

“Sons not by a daughter,” said Aaron.

“And the depository agreement for thy seed is less fraught?” snarled Moses. But then his wroth waned unto the taciturn. “All my sons are dead,” was his murmuring.

Potiphar was uncertain. He lowered his blade, but left it unsheathed.

“Every man is son to a dead father and father to a dead son,” said Aaron. “Every man is only the man who has no choice but to be himself. Every man is that he is. Every man is he who executes the identity assigned to him by fate.”

Spake Moses: “And I am the man assigned the identity Pharaoh of Egypt, and among that identity’s entailments is the production of an heir.”

“‘The dynamics of rule are in flux,’” quoth Aaron tenderly. “Thine utterance, made unto me long ago, but whose truth remains in force.”

“I take not its meaning now,” said Moses.

“Consider the future,” said Aaron. “At some point, a daughter of thine *will* have her womb turn from hardscrabble to dark soil, whether by my scheming, or by some third in thy succession of Josephs. Imagine now thy state of mind at that future moment.”

“I shall be transported with supreme joy,” said Moses.

“And after that?”

“I shall return to Egypt.”

“How?”

Potiphar sheathed his khopesh.

“I shall regale my people with tales of my adventures in the underworld, to which I descended after being drawn down unto death by the surging waters, as well they witnessed, true witness they will gladly bear to any; and their relief at my transcendence in returning from the realm beyond death shall alone be enough for them to raise me up as a god; but to do so with a cherubic heir in my entourage shall secure not just my throne unto my bloodline, but my name unto history.”

“And no pharaoh e’er impressed himself upon the stele of history through any means other than siring heirs?” asked Aaron.

“I will have defeated death!” said Moses.

“In truth, e’en the author of these thoughts I voice anon waxes indecisive on their merit,” said Aaron, “but towering o’er the many truths thou hast spoken this day is that we are at the frontier of my oracular talents. Have I misunderstood the injunctions of the Sphinx and his Hellenic whore, Pythia? Verily I say unto thee that yes, in one respect hath I; but in all others, I stand firm.”

“I would hear more,” said Moses.

“When peaceable and easy, oracles are amusing and fascinating, but when antagonistic, their obstructiveness and intrusiveness are unyielding,” spake Aaron. “Yet when they are peaceable and easy, they seem truly to bear the interests of their interlocutors foremost at heart, giving advice and issuing dicta that truly are sound and fair and kind in the eyes of all. Dost that affection for their interlocutors disappear in their antagonistic movements? Is it a diminution of their affection for their interlocutors that *causes* their antagonistic movements?”

“I know not,” said Moses.

“Nor I,” said Aaron, “but suspecteth do I now that, nay!, oracular affection for interlocutors pulses just as strong in their antagonistic episodes as in their easy ones. They intrude and obstruct not truly to thwart their interlocutors, but rather to distract them from the forces of fate that flow and coil and concresce unto their interlocutors’ own personal Eschatons; those forces of fate having missions too important to allow the interlocutors themselves to interfere.”

“Speak plainly,” commanded Moses.

“The oracles enjoined you as they did not because they wished to prevent thee from instantiating a dynasty, but because they wished to force you to go out into the Levant and make thyself worthy of one,” said Aaron. “The surest route into historic mem’ry’s as a conqueror, astride an army. Thou hast military experience and are at thy prime. Why must the planting of thy daughters’ fields be a harrying preoccupation rather than a diverting pastime? Go forth and conquer and plunder, slay and destroy, and magnify thine empire, and exalt thy name. *This* is the exhortation that, peradventure, the oracles encoded – but as usual none can parse an oracle’s emissions without half a hindsight.”

“But I have no army,” replied Moses.

“You shall have an army in one month,” said Aaron.

“Upon your life you swear this?” asked Moses. He gestured unto Potiphar, saying: “You swear this upon your life in front of the man whose blade shall enforce this newest covenant?”

Said Aaron: “I swear upon my life that you shall have an army in one month.”

Moses spake nought.

“This also gives you a means to test the boundaries of the oracular injunction,” said Aaron. “Yea, the Wilderness of Sin was not far enough away from the Nile to satisfy their parameters. But perhaps Gershon will be far enough away; or perhaps will Edom; or perhaps Moab or Og or Sihon. Your daughters shall accompany you whether at war abroad or in peace domestic, and plant unto them you can in each of those lands; and each planting in the lands thou subjugates shall be a lunge, or feint, or parry, in thy duel against the oracles. And if the oracles defeat you in one land, you have only to transfix that land’s noonday sun with an ululation or two and then sally forth unto war amid the next; and you shall know when you have wandered far enough to satisfy them when unto dark soil you at last arrive.”

Moses absorbed this in silence; and for the only time in either of their lives, Aaron witnessed him evince self-doubt. Then he spake unto Aaron, saying: “Only one month?”

“Only one month,” said Aaron.

CHAPTER 51

One month later, Aaron called upon Moses, saying: “O my prophet, the day has arrived for you to take receipt of thine army.”

“Verily had I not forgotten,” replied Moses. “Where shall this review take place?”

“Thine army, along with Potiphar, Hur, and Joshua, is massed on the north side of Horeb,” said Aaron. “Let us march the two of us around the mountain’s flank, and up somewhat its face, that ye may survey the scene in all its grandeur.”

And Moses and Aaron walked together.

“There is an Egyptian word that has betrayed my mem’ry,” said Aaron unto Moses. “Was a term of warfighting, uttered oft by thy generals, to describe foreigners who preferred the customs of their own birthlands over Egypt’s culture and bounty.”

“No words come to mind,” said Moses.

“‘Deniers’?” murmured Aaron. “‘Refusers’?”

“Lo! the word you seek is *raefidim*,” exclaimed Moses. “‘Rejectors,’ or peradventure ‘rejectionists.’ So long ago have been my warfighting days that I had forgotten.”

“Tis that, yea, *raefidim*,” said Aaron. “The army toward whose review we now march hath been trained using methods of my devising, with aid from Hur. And its efficacy is glorious for most – but there is a set of *raefidim* who reject the training.”

“Kill them,” said Moses.

“Certainly I would, if I could identify them prior to warfighting,” said Aaron. “But no sign presages a *raefidim* before he his weapon wields.”

Moses stopped on the path amid the foothills of Mount Horeb. “How am I to win battles with men of fickle gut and wilted spine? An army was our covenant, not a rabble of occasional manslayers!”

Aaron stopped and faced him unruffled, saying: “And what is an army, exactly?”

Said Moses: “A band of soldiers bent on killing soldiers of other armies.”

Said Aaron: “And why is killing the soldiers of other armies desirable?”

Said Moses: “Because it curtails their ability to kill the soldiers of one’s own.”

Aaron asked, “Yes, but why all this killing in the first place? Must not there have been some initial intention of enmity between the parties, to induce them to muster armies against one another?”

“Verily,” replied Moses.

Aaron said, “And do such intentions of enmity burn in the hearts of only those people able to muster armies?”

“No,” replied Moses, “such intentions of enmity are far more widespread than the flesh and metal to enact them.”

“Verily, thou hast said it: an army is valuable to hold in surety, but yea, the erasure of thine enemy’s intentions of enmity? that is a pearl of great price indeed,” said Aaron. “An army fearsome enough to defeat all warfighters and manslayers that a foreign nation might send against it, this is good; but an army fearsome enough to deter the monarchs of foreign nations from sending such men in the first place, this is better.”

“Speak plainly,” said Moses.

“Rather, I shall speak no more,” replied Aaron, “and we shall reconvene after the review.”

“After this battle of *raefidim*,” Moses snorted, and resumed his march.

CHAPTER 52

Atop a promontory at the north face of Mount Horeb were already stationed Potiphar, Joshua, and Hur; and hailed and welcomed they Moses and Aaron as those men arrived. Potiphar had held a large ram's horn, which he proffered to Aaron.

Moses looked out upon the plains stretching away from the mountain, wherein stood hundreds of men and boys of varying age. Moses was very wroth, and cried out unto Aaron: "Less than a thousand men? Some not e'en men, by their stature! And – what spieth I now, staffs and rods? Not a proper blade among them? Supposeth I now thou shalt regale me with visions of the boulevard of conquest thou now unfurlest before me from one end of the Levant to the other!"

Said Aaron: "I shall speak no more, and we shall reconvene after the review." And then he blew loud and long upon the ram's horn.

On the plain below, the men and boys of Moses's army turned and faced the mountain, staring up at the tiny figures perched thereupon.

Hur spake unto Moses, saying: "O my prophet, thy hands, and their postures, shall be the thing that signals to your manslayers in what maneuvers they ought engage. Whene'er our high priest sounds his ram's horn, this interrupts their frenzy and induces them to look at thee, to apprehend thine orders. Presently thy hands are at thy sides, so in thy manslayers' eyes, no maneuver is called for. But if thou raisest both hands as high up as possible, the maneuvers shall commence."

Moses did as he was bid.

On the plain below, the men and boys of Moses' army split down the middle, turned to face each other, and fell upon each other with staff and rod, each side striking the other in ferocious and terrible fury. Screams and cries and shrieks drifted up to where Moses and his coterie perched.

Moses dropped both hands to his sides, saying: "I wish not for the death of my own men!" But the bloodshed below continued. "Wherefore persisteth they?" cried Moses.

Aaron blew loud and long upon the ram's horn; and Moses's manslayers stopped their combat at once, and turned again in attention; and when their sight registered Moses's configuration, they stopped.

"Hast thou tasted madness?" said Moses unto Aaron.

"Wait for the *raefidim*," replied Aaron. "When I sound the ram's horn again, shalt thou raise only one hand high, and leave the other as it lies." And he blew loud and long upon the ram's horn.

Moses, confounded, did as he was bid.

Once again did the men and boys on the plain below split down the middle, and turn to face each other; but only one side fell upon the other with staff and rod – the side matching the side of Moses's upraised hand.

The other side stood motionless, allowing blow after blow to rain down upon them, rod and staff tearing the blood out of their flesh, bursting the brains out of their skulls, exorcising the life out of their bodies and onto the hardscrabble beneath their feet.

“Why do not they resist? Why do not they fight back?” whispered Moses.

“Because Hur and I have manipulated their minds to deprive them of that possibility,” replied Aaron.

The others stood silent as Moses beheld the spectacle of death on the plain below.

Aaron blew loud and long upon the ram’s horn; and Moses’s manslayers stopped their bloodshed at once, and turned again in attention.

“Reverse now,” said Aaron, and Moses, adaze, did.

Once again did the thousand men and boys on the plain below split down the middle, and turn to face each other, but this time the side that had been meek and accepting of its slaughter became the dealers of death, and the other side, being stripped of aggression, stood fast in the face of death’s tide’s reversal.

“This cannot be,” whispered Moses, and abruptly Potiphar and Hur stepped toward him, for lo! did the prophet’s knees weaken, and tumbled he backward unto Horeb’s rocks. Only the intercession of Potiphar and Hur kept him upright.

“Keep thy hand raised!” snarled Aaron, his gaze never breaking from the mechanistic torment below.

“O my high priest,” said Hur.

Aaron turned to look and saw that Moses’s face shone forth with an expression of such horror and torment that he could not bear to look upon it. Nor could Potiphar, nor Hur, nor Joshua; all who stole glances at the shining face of Moses felt cold winds rattle and shiver their Urim and Thummim.

Aaron sighed and blew loudly upon the ram’s horn; three short bursts. And the violence below, and the composure and discipline needed to foster it, ceased.

“Here now the *raefidim*,” said Aaron unto Moses – quickly, ere averting his gaze.

A chorus of cries, and shrieks, and wails, drifted up from the plain below. Aaron judged that about a third of the manslayers were dead; of the remainder, a few dozen fled, running away from Mount Horeb. These *raefidim* ran ere they were sure the ram’s horn would ne’er again reach their ears.

“What hast thou wrought?” whispered Moses, who was now able to stand on his own, but whose face still shone with radiant horror.

“One needs no army, prim and proper with warfighters brimming of discipline, plated in expensive armor and strapped with expensive arms, when one has the means to sidestep battle

entirely and strike terror directly into the hearts of the monarchs and generals who might otherwise sally them forth," said Aaron. "Think of thine army not as a collection of men wielding weapons, but as a weapon itself, for thee to wield in the faces of thy kingly rivals."

Moses spake nought.

"Hur and I can train the first generation," continued Aaron, "and thereafter, as new generations are brought forth from the nation of Israel, they can be raised within this tradition, manslayers from birth, with no need to artificially remove any notions from their minds, for the terrain of their minds will be of such perpetually scorched earth that contrary notions will ne'er take root."

Moses spake nought.

"Think on it, O master," said Aaron softly. "How much would a traditional army need to hate, and fear, and despise, and cower before, its king or general, in order to prefer, over disobedience, participation in the spectacle you just beheld? How powerful a lesson would the witness of that be to the armies and kings and generals of foreign nations?"

Moses kept his peace long ere saying: "I shall needs wear a veil, to be unrecognized as I preside over this new thing."

"So it shall be," said Aaron, and marked the moment for later discussion with Aholiab.

CHAPTER 53

One year later, half the Israelite army, with Joshua its general, and Moses its prophet, and Potiphar his manservant, and Hur his assistant, marched up to the gates of Jericho, whose stout walls towered over them. They towered not over Aaron, who was back in the Wilderness of Sin, presiding over the encampment.

Now Jericho was straitly shut up because of the children of Israel: none went out, and none came in. But this troubled the Israelites not.

No high vantage existed within sight of the walls of Jericho suitable for Moses to conduct his campaign, but Hur and Potiphar hoisted upon their shoulders the empty Ark of the Covenant, into which Moses climbed to stand up, elevated enough to be seen by all his manslayers. And Joshua stood by, ram's horn in hand, ready.

The Israelites could see archers and spearmen atop the walls of Jericho; they could hear their jeering and see the missiles flying. They stayed just enough afield of Jericho to be unharmed, and stood, motionless and silent.

Joshua sounded two short tones from the ram's horn, and the column of Israelite manslayers marched entirely around the fortress one time. Then did Joshua blow loud and long on the ram's horn; and did all the manslayers turn and regard Moses, standing in the Ark of the Covenant, with his veil over his face.

Moses raised one hand high; and the sounds of jeering drifted down from atop the walls of Jericho no more; for did one half of his manslayers stand meek and motionless as the other half wrought murderous bloodshed unto them.

Moses spake unto Joshua, who sounded the ram's horn again; and this time Moses raised his other hand high, and the spectacle was reversed.

A handful of *raefidim* fled, trying to seek sanctuary with the citizens of Jericho, but they were felled by archers before reaching the gate.

The remaining manslayers reorganized into a column, with Moses and his officers now at its head, and marched silently away from Jericho.

They did this six more times, over six more days; and each morning wherein they marched up to the walls of Jericho, their numbers seemed not diminished; for Moses had kept the other half of his army half a day's march from the city, and out of sight, as reinforcements. Moses was prepared to do this for another month.

But on the seventh day, at the conclusion of the seventh vulgar display of power, a great shout went up from behind the walls of Jericho, and their morale was routed; and they quit the city, deserter upon deserter, a flood of terrified men, women, and children, civilian, archer, and spearman, and abandoned their city utterly.

And Joshua was able to enter Jericho as easily as if its walls had tumbled to the earth.

CHAPTER 54

And it came to pass that years accrued, and in them Aaron saw the birth of more sons: Eliazar by Elisheba, and many by his menarchic Levite sistren; the eldest of these being Ithamar.

And during that time, Joshua and Moses roamed the Levant, conquering and subjugating every foreign nation they encountered, gaining access to their textiles and weapons and crops and precious metals. Soon the manslayers had real blades, but eschewed they helmets or armor; they faced each other in slaughter in rough raiment, yea, in rags, better to exhibit the bloodshed.

But through it all, verily did Moses's seed yet find no purchase in the hardscrabble of his daughters' wombs; for whene'er the Israelite army returned to the encampment in the Wilderness of Sin to resupply and induct new manslayers, Miriam replenisheth did her stock of myrrh from the baskets of Aholiab.

The Israelites marauded among all the Levantine nations; but knoweth not did the Israelite leadership that with them had they the entire Land of Kadesh in tow.

CHAPTER 55

And it came to pass, years later, that Balak, king of the Moabites, saw all that the Exodian manslayers had done to Jericho, and the Amorites, and heard tales of more distant lands conquered by the Exodians. And Moab was sore afraid of the people, because they were many: and Moab was distressed because of the Exodians, and their terrible, ferocious god.

Balak said unto his advisers: “What is to be done?”

His advisers did not answer, for they knew not how to save Moab.

“None amongst you hath e’en a scrap of wisdom?”

His advisers did not answer, for had they wisdom enough not to simulate wisdom yet unreached.

“Then we are doomed,” said Balak, “for now shall this company lick up all that are round about us, as the ox licketh up the grass of the field.”

“O my king, there is one man who might have the wisdom ye seek,” said an adviser, with some trembling.

“Name him,” said Balak.

“Al Masih ad-Dajjal,” said the adviser, and his hand fell upon his face.

“I know well the man you mean,” replied Balak, “and know well the reasons for your fearing his words. But these Exodians are a terror; and peradventure I shall needs befriend one terror to drive another away.”

Balak sent messengers therefore unto al Masih ad-Dajjal, who dwelt in the land of Bethor, which is by the river of the land of the children of his people, to call him, saying: “O Masih ad-Dajjal, behold, there is a people come out from Egypt: behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me: Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me: peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land: for I hear that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.”

And al Masih ad-Dajjal said unto the messengers of Moab whom Balak had dispatched, “O princes of Moab, my name is Balaam, a humble son of Bethor.”

And the messengers of Moab grew anxious, and murmured among each other, “Hath we erred? Could this Balaam son of Bethor be one and the same with the man we seek, al Masih ad-Dajjal?”

And Balaam was filled with the spirit of God, and overheard their murmurings, and said unto them: “I hath answered to this appellation thou offerest, ‘al Masih ad-Dajjal,’ in my youth, when the destruction of rampant idols and indolent theities was business enough to support a man. Shieldbearer of Unas, as to how I got my start! And now this Balak of yours seems wroth at these Exodians, and seeks the assassination of their god Yahweh. But I am a young man no more, and have no yearning for such strenuous grandiosities. Go back where you came from.”

The princes returned to Moab and said unto Balak: “Balaam refuseth to come with us.”

And Balak sent yet again princes, more, and more honourable than they. And they came to Balaam, and said to him, “Thus saith Balak: ‘Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me: For I will promote thee unto very great honour, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me: come therefore, I pray thee, curse me these Exodian people.’”

And Balaam answered and said unto the servants of Balak, “Would Balak make me this house filled of silver and gold?” And the newer crop of princes murmured among each other before saying: “Yes, this shall the kingdom of Moab do.” And Balaam saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab.

And when Balak heard that Balaam was come, he went out to meet him unto a city of Moab, which is in the border of Arnon, which is in the utmost coast.

Balak said unto Balaam: “Did I not earnestly send unto thee to call thee? wherefore camest thou not unto me? am I not able indeed to promote thee to honour?”

Balaam said unto Balak: “Lo, I am come unto thee: have I now any power at all to say any thing?”

And Balaam went with Balak, and they came unto Kirjathhuzoth. And it came to pass on the morrow, that Balak took Balaam, and brought him up into the high places of Baal, that thence he might see the utmost part of the Exodian army.

And Balaam said unto Balak, “Build me here seven altars, and prepare me here seven oxen and seven rams.” And Balak did as he was bid, offering unto every altar a bullock and a ram.

And Balaam said unto Balak, “Stand now amid thy burnt offerings, and narrate the spectacle I see on the plains below us.”

Said Balak: “Behind the Exodian army, whereupon their soldiers stand, half in slaughter, half in peace at being slaughtered, is an encampment; how goodly seem their tents, and their tabernacles! As the valleys are they march to spread forth, as determined as gardens by the river’s side, as the trees of lign aloes which all Levantines hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters. Seest now their god Yahweh, perched aloft his unwheeled chariot, face shrouded in black veiling, one arm raised high, the other held low? Hearest thee the soundings of his rams’ horns? This god of the Exodians shall pour the water out of his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters, and his king shall be higher than all, and his kingdom shall be exalted. He was brought forth out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn: he shall eat up the nations his enemies, and shall break their bones, and pierce them through with his arrows.”

Balaam looked at the Exodians and saw what Balak meant, yea, a god who’d fixed his canon upon his children’s self-slaughter. Said he: “Thou hast called me here to deal a curse unto these enemies of yours?”

Balak replied, “I pray thee, yes!”

Said Balaam: “Not only hath I no power to curse these people or their god; but hast thou no standing to wish for me to curse them.”

Said Balak: “Wherefore sayest thou so?”

And Balaam, who in his youth had been shieldbearer to Unas, and then tobacconist to Kloskurbeh, and then apprenticed unto Ptah, all the while answering betimes to ‘al Masih ad-Dajjal,’ said unto Balak: “Any god whose primary concern is with greatness, rather than goodness, is a lesser god. Any god whose claims to goodness can be defended only by reason of the commandments issueth he unto his people, rather than by reason of the peace and contentment his presence naturally calls forth from their hearts and minds; verily I say unto thee: this is a lesser god. Any god who takes as his only sustenance the adulation reaped of subordinates, rather than his own concordance with moral laws whose soundness and goodness are planted and tended by all, yea, even by his subordinates; verily I say unto thee: this is a lesser god. Any god who betimes does good works, and betimes does evil works, but mostly hides, in abstinence from discernible works altogether, is a lesser god. Any god who prefereth to speak harshly unto his flock, in expectation that the flock reply only in softness, rather than to speak unto them softly while welcoming their response, e’en in what may peradventure be all its high din and clamor; verily I say unto thee: this is a lesser god. What ye hast shewn unto me upon the great plains below is simply the greatest of the lesser gods; and since thou dost cleaveth unto a lesser god thyself, I say, what basis have ye to complain about the god of these Exodians, aside from thine own jealousy and envy? For the lesser gods of all nations operate through the projection of fear into the hearts and minds of foreign nations; and usually this is cause for complaint because it is achieved by reason of the manslaughter of the foreign nations. Yet, verily I say unto thee, these here Exodians have found themselves a lesser god that achieves this end, but behold! without spilling the blood of any foreign nation. They endlessly manufacture the same fear through the spillage of only their own blood, in grand and horrifying spectacle. But it all falls in the same moral category: the pointless, accursed antics of a lesser, accursed god. Both thee and the Exodians are aligned with lesser gods, and are both cursed because of it. Unto both your houses, yea, do I strike with ten plagues! Knowest should thee by now that greatness is the worst cardinality for divinity! for a greater god, or no god at all – both surpass the goodness of a god who, in fixing his thirst for greatness unto unquenchability, is left forever lesser.”

And Balaam rose up, and went and returned to his place: and Balak also went his way.

CHAPTER 56

And it came to pass that the Israelite army returned to the encampment in the Wilderness of Sin, for rest and resupply, having just conquered the Amorites. Elisheba was in high vigor, eager to spend time with her sisters. But two days passed without sighting of e'en Miriam.

Elisheba called upon Moses, saying: "O my father, pleased am I to see thee well and living."

Said Moses: "And I you, my little pomegranate."

"Where is Miriam?" asked Elisheba.

"She is of heavy heart, and knowest not I the cause," replied Moses. "Peradventure thou couldst speak with her, and sample the contents of her Urim and Thummim?"

"Verily shall I," said Elisheba.

"Miriam is in the red tent, three apart from here," said Moses.

Elisheba kept her peace long ere saying, "O my father, I would ask a favor of thee."

"Name it," said Moses.

"Wish I that I might pose a question unto thee, as like unto the manner in which thou hast often posed questions unto oracles, such as the Sphinx, or my husband," said Elisheba; "for the more days doth my soul accrue, the more vexed am I by the same stubborn question. Thine eloquence is as like unto an oracle; art thou willing to play oracle in the face of my mortal curiosity?"

"Verily, my little pomegranate; the mere notion gladdens my heart," replied Moses, "although in truth I speak not eloquently. What must thou come to understand?"

Said Elisheba: "Do men hate women?"

Moses was silent long ere saying, "I know not."

Said Elisheba, with play in her heart: "Thy warfighting prowess doth exceed thine oracular talents."

But Moses remained grave. "It is not the case that every man alive harbors hatred for every woman alive," he said finally. "But the essence of masculinity verily doth harbor some trace of antipathy for the essence of femininity."

"Wherefore sayest thou so?" asked Elisheba.

"Envy," replied Moses. "For masculinity allocates its identities to the future, while femininity allocates its identities to the present. And this causes women to feel themselves welcomed by the present; every moment that binds a woman to the present is an opportunity for her to discover a new facet, yea, a new manifestation, of her identity. But men do not feel welcomed by the present; lo! do they feel menaced, and threatened, by the present. Every moment that binds a man to the present is a fraught opportunity to fail to cleave unto his identity, which exists most fully ever in the future; and this compels the minds of men to flee the present into the future,

where they hope to find their identities waiting for them. Yea, it is this truth that underpins our entire Levantine enterprise, to secure the throne of Egypt unto my bloodline; for the only hope a masculine identity has of existence is for the man assigned to it to build a path, or bridge, or span, from his being, in the present, to his identity, in the future. Whereas the woman assigned to a feminine identity has only to exist securely in the present in order to discover its nature and meaning."

"And men envy women their security amid the present?" asked Elisheba.

"Verily," said Moses. "For doth also men aspire to leaven the identities assigned to them with ingredients of courage, and resoluteness, and mastery; yet doth exposure to the present belie how weakly those qualities inhere to them. And woe betide the woman who innocently observes those qualities being stripped from a man by the present, as like unto a fallen steer having its bones scoured clean by a haboob! For then is there an entanglement of mutual incomprehensions: the woman thinks the man to be a sort of grandiose simpleton, plentifully endowed with intentions, but inhibited of capability; while the man himself, amid the present, finds that no matter how formidable might his capabilities be, he is utterly cut off from his intentions, inherent as they are only unto his assigned identity, which exposure to the present hath obstructed from him. Femininity can decide what should occur, or what should not occur, solely by surveying Her surroundings in the present; but masculinity remains rudderless in the present no matter how much surveying of the surroundings He does."

"Thank you, O great oracle," said Elisheba. "Hie I now unto Miriam, to gauge her mood and mettle." And she stood and took her leave.

CHAPTER 57

Elisheba entered Miriam's tent and found her sister there, aching and low. Miriam wept as they embraced.

"O my beloved eldest sister," said Elisheba, truly frightened at Miriam's countenance. "Whence this despondence?"

"It never ends," said Miriam softly. "Our father's commitment to work incest of the blood is unwavering. For lo! my stratagem had succeeded! After the tide of blood had struck all his daughters' wombs, by my hand, he did believe that the curse of the oracles had resurrected to plague him. Ne'er thought I that thy husband would reorient this failure from an ending into a continuance. And now the bloodshed of our people is twofold: I murder his sons in the name of our dignity, and his sons murder each other in the name of his."

"His desperation to escape the present," murmured Elisheba.

"What sayest thou now?" asked Miriam.

"Asked I our father, do men hate women?" said Elisheba.

Miriam sat up and took notice, saying: "And what manner of reply did this generate?"

"Caught not I all his lengthy utterance," replied Elisheba, "but his answer hinged upon temporal orientations of identity. Submitteth he that masculine identities ne'er truly exist in the present, and are allowed to flower and manifest only in the future; while feminine identities are at home in the present, and exist fully there as they manifesteth do; and for this unearned peace amid the present do men envy, and therefore begrudge, women."

"Encompasseth did his rumination the possibility of femininity entering the future?" asked Miriam.

"Nay," replied Elisheba.

Miriam's countenance changed. "I would be willing to depart the present if it means seizing control of our father's future," said she.

"Speak more unto me thus," said Elisheba.

And Miriam did.

CHAPTER 58

The next day, Elisheba called upon Moses. “O my father, I have news of Miriam, that I share now in fear,” said she.

“What has happened?” asked Moses.

“When yesterday I spake with her, her heart seemed very low, as thou had said,” replied Elisheba. “I had suggested that she spend time in prayer and contemplation, at the Tabernacle, communing with the Lord Our God. And this she agreed to do. But now I find her not at the Tabernacle, nor her own tent, nor at Bezalel’s tent of artisanry, nor any other place I know of her frequency.”

“Was thy husband in the Tabernacle when ye sought?” asked Moses.

“Nay,” said Elisheba.

“Sought thou in the Holy of Holies?” asked Moses.

“Nay!” said Elisheba; “for the Lord Our God dwelleth there, and only the most determined blasphemer would set foot within.”

“Let us seek within the Holy of Holies,” said Moses. “I shall vouch for thee, should thy husband come to object.”

“As you wish,” said Elisheba, displaying fear.

Moses and Elisheba crossed the encampment to where the Tabernacle stood, silent and empty. “Miriam!” cried Moses, to no utterance in return.

Moses crossed the Tabernacle to the Holy of Holies. “Miriam?” said he, again to no utterance in return.

Moses pulled back the curtain and stepped into the Holy of Holies.

His voice projected back unto Elisheba’s ears: “Miriam is not here.” But then he did not exit the Holy of Holies, but rather remained in silence.

“What manner of…” came Moses’s voice. Then he cried sharply: “Elisheba! Come here!”

Elisheba entered the Holy of Holies.

“These here are the stone tablets of the commandments I brought down from Mount Horeb, lo those years ago,” said Moses, gesturing unto the tablets. “What is this tablet?” For there was a new tablet, more recently hewn, resting against the first set of tablets so as to obscure them.

Moses picked up the new tablet and read:

THE COMMANDMENTS OF KADESH

1. MEN ALONE SHALL CONTROL THE TIMING OF LIFE'S BEGINNING
2. WOMEN ALONE SHALL CONTROL THE TIMING OF LIFE'S ENDING
3. CHILDREN SHALL HONOR THEIR GUARDIANS
4. ADULTS SHALL HONOR THEIR PROTECTORATES
5. LET NO FATHER JOIN WITH HIS DAUGHTER, BE SHE SUCH BY BLOOD OR BY AFFECTION
6. LET NO MOTHER JOIN WITH HER SON, BE HE SUCH BY BLOOD OR BY AFFECTION
7. LET NO MAN PLANT HIS SEED IN A WOMAN WHO HATH NOT AGREED ON A PRIOR OCCASION
8. LET NO WOMAN REFUSE THE SEED OF A MAN UNTO WHOM SHE HATH AGREED ON A PRIOR OCCASION
9. LOVE THY NEIGHBOR
10. TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

"Is this thy husband's latest brainchild?" asked Moses. "What is 'Kadesh'?"

"It is a land nearby," answered Elisheba. "Perhaps that is where Miriam has gone! I shall take you there."

And it came to pass that Elisheba led Moses out of the encampment on a short walk to the seashore, yea, cliffs over a hundred cubits tall, with a few cubits of beach beneath. Elisheba led her father to the cliffs' edge; and from thence south to an opening in the ground, wide and to great depth.

Said Moses: "What is this maw in the earth, at such great height?"

Said Elisheba: "It is a shaft, hewn from the rock of the cliffs, down to an inlet. Betimes the inlet is dry, and betimes flooded; but suspecteth I now it is dry."

Moses approached and peered over the edge, down the shaft. "It is like a well," said he. Then his eyes were opened, and a great cry and wailing emerged from his mouth – for at the bottom of the Well of Miriam in the Land of Kadesh were the dead bodies of all Elisheba's sisters, the dead bodies of all Moses's other daughters. Moses stared down the Well of Miriam at the eleven lifeless wombs that now would ne'er bridge Moses the man unto his futurebound identity, Ramses the dynastogene.

Elisheba wept as Moses roared and wailed, "What has happened?"

"I know not, O my father," said Elisheba through her tears.

Said Moses unto Elisheba: "Find Potiphar."

CHAPTER 59

Aaron was in the Tabernacle with Nadab and Abihu when Moses and Potiphar called upon him.

“Hail, O my prophet,” said Aaron.

Potiphar drew his khopesh and rested it at Aaron’s throat.

Aaron spake nought.

“All my daughters are dead,” screamed Moses.

Said Aaron: “Elisheba too?”

“Nay, Elisheba yet lives,” said Moses, “but the other eleven are dead, their bodies in a crevasse in the shore cliffs. All eleven are dead!”

“Of myrrh?” asked Aaron, and then was still.

“Myrrh,” said Moses.

Aaron shook his head, as if to summon himself from reverie. “Pay it no mind,” he murmured.

Moses looked at Potiphar and nodded once.

Potiphar brandished his khopesh mightily, and with it hacked off one of Aaron’s hands. Aaron screamed and wailed as the hand spasmed on the ground. Nadab and Abihu cried out, and were afraid.

Moses stood directly in Aaron’s face and said: “What has myrrh to do with this?”

“O master –” began Aaron.

Moses spake calmly unto Potiphar: “The odds of combat have been evened, O Potiphar, for now Aaron has the same number of hands as thou hast of khopeshes.” Then, to Aaron: “Wish ye to adjust those odds again?”

Aaron winced and murmured, staring at his decoupled hand.

“O high priest of the Lord Your God, answer me now: what has myrrh to do with this?”

“Miriam discovered that it can induce miscarriages if eaten in the right quantity by a pregnant woman,” gasped Aaron. “The curse of the oracles was not the foe against which thou hast lunged and parried amid the Levantine kingdoms, but rather thine own eldest daughter, who was filled with righteous repugnance at thy method for securing thy throne unto thy bloodline.”

“And thou hadst knowledge of her stratagem,” said Moses.

“Forgive me! for I knew well what they do,” said Aaron, and braced for the second blow.

Moses turned to Nadab and Abihu. “Sons of the priesthood,” said he, “ready now a burnt offering, that with it we might fend off the wrath of God that gathers o’er the encampment.” And

at once they fetched oil and kindling, as their father had taught them, and prepared the bronze altar for the ritual.

As Nadab and Abihu labored, Moses said: “Woe! woe! how I hath erred! In my eagerness to recognize your talents for insight and strategy did I overlook that these are the exact qualities least proximate to loyalty! What is honor to you? Peradventure ye perceive it as a strange fume, as like unto a cloud of incense, that others seem not to mind, yet against which your nostrils and other sensibilities rebel? And thy keen mind cautions the rest of ye, saying, ‘Complain not of all this stink of honor, lest thy protestations mark thee as somewise crippled’? At last I understand the root of thine invention of Yahweh – for any of the basic kindnesses and decencies that mark a man as distinct from beasts of the plains and birds of the air are, to thee, off-putting pufferies, extravagant pretensions, that bolster nought thine aims but rather impede them all; whereas the vacuous frigidity of the divine feels upon your isolated flesh as balmy as the Nile’s breeze does upon mine.”

Aaron spake nought.

Moses turned to Nadab and Abihu, saying: “Has the oil been fetched?”

“Yes, O my prophet,” said Nadab, gesturing to a nearby jug.

“Has the kindling been ignited?”

“Yes, O my prophet,” said Abihu, gesturing to the nearby altar.

“Excellent,” said Moses, and seized the jug, and doused Nadab and Abihu with oil, and thrust their heads into the burgeoning altar, causing them to roil with fire.

Aaron and his sons screamed.

Moses held their heads in the censers as long as he could, withdrawing his hands only when the leaping flames threatened to burn them.

“Wherefore do you wail, O high priest?” wondered Moses. “Is it because my sacrifice adhereth not to the strictures handed down by the Lord Thy God? Doth my fire not pass muster? Peradventure my fire is profane? Or foreign? What manner of grievous violation against thine invisible swine plays out now before His most faithful servants?”

Aaron screamed and screamed. Anon his sons stopped screaming and fell dead.

“We shall summit Horeb now, together, to find out what punishment the Lord Thy God deems meet for me.”

Aaron spake meekly: “I would say goodbye to Elisheba first.”

Moses considered, then said unto Potiphar: “Accompany him to his tent and give him five minutes to make goodbye.”

Potiphar sheathed his khopesh and shepherded Aaron out. Moses picked up Aaron’s hand, threw it in the fire, and wept.

CHAPTER 60

Aaron staggered into his tent, clutching the other wrist with his hand. Elisheba sat in the corner, reacting not.

“O my love!” said Aaron.

Elisheba, adaze, turned in sluggish dullness to regard her husband. “O my husband,” said she. “What has happened to thee?”

“There is no time, O my love,” said Aaron. “In this moment I needst thine unquestioning obedience.”

Elisheba was silent long ere saying: “All my sisters are dead.” And she wept not. Her Urim and Thummim were dry as the day they were kilned.

“O my love,” said Aaron slowly, “mourn do I with thee in thy loss.”

Elisheba spake nought.

“O my love,” said Aaron, “assuredly do I mourn, but in shorter terms, in this moment I needst thine unquestioning obedience and compliance of action.”

“Thou has it, O my husband,” said Elisheba.

“I am to accompany Moses to the summit of Horeb, to petition the Lord Our God to learn more of what hath transpired with thy sistren. But I am injured, as thou seest, and in truth am not needed for his journeys to the mountaintop, wherein he communicates with the Lord Our God face-to-face, and needs not a divinatory intermediary like me.”

“What wouldst thou have me do?” asked Elisheba.

“Take my place, while I remain and convalesce,” said Aaron. “I shall divest of this priestly garb, and our heights being proximate, shalt you don them in my stead. And speak not, no matter what is spoken unto thee – and hold low the brim of thy cloak, that thy face is obscured to all but the most direct glances.”

“This I shall do,” said Elisheba.

“And be sure to nurse thy hand – act as if thou art suffering in thy movements,” said Aaron.

“That shall require no act,” said Elisheba. Then, still sluggish: “O my husband.”

“Yes,” said Aaron.

“Will I see the Lord Our God?”

Aaron hesitated nought ere saying: “Verily.”

And it came to pass that Elisheba was dressed in the garb of the High Priest of the Lord Her God; and Aaron was dressed in the tunic of a common man.

CHAPTER 61

The High Priest and Potiphar returned to the Tabernacle, where the cinders of Nadab and Abihu lay gnarled amid the dust. The brim of the High Priest's cloak was pulled down low.

"Art thou ready?" asked Moses.

The High Priest nodded.

The three ascended the mountain in single file: High Priest first, followed by Potiphar, followed by Moses. Anon they reached the great fissure in the mountain, into which Moses had once nearly fallen.

Moses took hold of the High Priest and said softly: "Verily, did I love thee as my own."

And he hurled the High Priest into the fissure.

And Elisheba's voice drifted up from the maw of the earth as she fell, saying, "I am thine own."

Moses, aghast, could speak nought.

Aaron, who had been hiding amid the bushes nearby, lunged forth and traversed the space like an arrow, hurling Moses into the fissure after his daughter.

Time seemed to slow for Moses – a symptom of departure from the present. He tumbled in space as he plunged, and when next he glimpsed an upward vantage, he saw the head of Aaron the Levite scion, decoupled, tumbling after him into the maw of the earth.

Moses's heart gladdened at the sight of Aaron's unanchored visage, and he was filled with gratitude to loyal Potiphar, for this act of manslaying true. And the stirrings of Moses's heart were joined by the spirits of Isis and Osiris, who revealed themselves in song, which he sang through his final cubits:

> Give ear, ye heavens, and I will speak;
> and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.
> My doctrine shall drop as the rain,
> my speech shall distil as the dew;
> as the small rain upon the tender grass,
> and as the showers upon the herb.
> For I will proclaim the names of gods;
> ascribe ye greatness unto Egypt!

EPILOGIA

POTIPHAR wandered the Levant, living by his khopesh. If peradventure he got into conversation with a man, at market or temple or stable, he might say that he was the son of Moses; but if any asked his name outright, he would answer only that he was a stranger there.

HUR died in his own sin.

ELIAZAR AND ITHAMAR reached manhood, and commenceth did their presiding over the remnants of those Levites still content to identify as such.

THE EXODIAN MANSLAYERS were taken in by the nations of the Levant, who took great pity on them, and mourned the torments inflicted upon their minds and bodies in service to the bloodthirsty whim of their sadistic, unloving god, Yahweh. The Levantine nations designated six Cities of Refuge – Golan, Ramoth, Bosor, Kedesh, Shechem, and Hebron – at which any Exodian manslayer, emancipated from the wicked ram's horn, could seek asylum, and receive care and protection to the end of his days.

THE ISRAELITES, no longer bound to the Wilderness of Sin, wandered forth unto the cities and kingdoms of the Levant, in small bands, yea, neighborhood by neighborhood, tribe by tribe, each at its own pace, each to its own trajectory, some near and some distant. Of all the men and women and children among their number, were some agape, and some agog. Shouldereth did they for the first time with wonder and awe the burden of free spirits; traverseth did they the veil of knowledge of good and evil, their Urim and Thummim jostling and clunking and sloshing full with distillate of awareness, and also with grace. Ventured they forth into the risen night, across the great plains, 'neath the majesty of the nightsky; forevermore reminding themselves to exhibit the kindness and understanding upon whose receipt from others their own survival would thenceforth ever depend. And maketh did they a joyful noise, my dear Hosius, singing glad anthems to the welkin at dusk.

TRANSLATOR'S AFTERWORD

Aaron now stands revealed as the most evil man ever to walk the earth. Like every other trickster god found in every other pantheon, the unique constraints of his upbringing bestowed unto him unique capabilities, sufficient to permanently change the entire world; yet he used these powers not for the betterment of the world, nor even of any family or nation or people, but rather for the furtherance of his own selfish pursuits, of control over others and satisfaction of his endless appetites.

Any man or woman who dwells now in the United States of America – within which the hopes of the world once bloomed, and o'er which a flag once flew to call forth the best that could be found within the human spirit, and unto which Lady Liberty once offered to the rest of the world unconditional acceptance – and fails to regard Aaron's relentless pursuit of control over others and satisfaction of his endless appetites as evil, or worse yet, attempts to portray his acts as somewise good, through invocations of "independence," or "meritocracy," or "resourcefulness," or "rugged individualism," or "efficiency," or "self-reliance," or "prosperity," or "a code of honor," or "the calling of duty," or "rewarding success," or "creative destruction," or any of the other evil banalities that flow daily from the mouths of the vacuous capitalist oligarchs whom Aaron's selfish and wicked ideology hath delivered unto thee by reason of thine exploitation, is unqualified to make any pronouncement about any matter pertaining to morals, or virtues, or sin, or iniquity, or ethics, or responsibility, or harm, or redemption, or prevention, or slippery slopes, or the value of human life.

Shut now thy mouths forever, vacuous capitalist oligarchs, and thy fawning sycophants, lest the purifying vengeance of the One True God, She Who Is The Earth, bestill thy tongues and stifle the babbling ignorance of thy monotonous hearts. For is it not revealing that the credo of a monotheity at masculinity is "I am that I am," whereas the Earth, which is a monotheity at femininity, holds as Her credo "I am that thou art"? Which credo more authentically calls forth a compelling supernal wondrousness, and an irrepressible urge to worship? I ask thee truly, which monotheity seems like the grander tiresome abusive psychopath to thee?

Know now that the symbol of the cross, displayed proudly by smug, deluded somnambulists across the land, shall be, unto those with eyes to see, a bold declaration of one's secret belief in one's own worthlessness and emptiness. For a cross on a building, or in a field, or affixed unto a vehicle, or hanging from a wall of a room, or cast in gold resting at one's throat, or needled with ink upon one's flesh, is a loud cry unto the multitudes saying, "I am content to do whatsoever I am told, no matter how transparently abusive and psychopathic it may be, so long as it be told to me in baroque, archaic, labyrinthine language, and especially so long as it be told to me as a child, when my mind hath not yet grown enough to independently evaluate evidence or factual claims, or, yea, even to know the names of mine own feelings."

Any American Christian who reads this Book of Aaron and still proclaims faith in Yahweh and his bastard Nazarene carpenter (so unskilled and deficient at his profession as to die by nails, the simplest of his own instruments) does so because they value their own Urim and Thummim less than they value the childish, comforting lies told to them in their youth, or the childish, comforting lies told to them by their priests and pastors and bishops and reverends weekly.

Such an American Christian is a devoted Aaronite, for whom any ideological contortion can be found to justify any wicked or iniquitous action, so long as it prolongs this accursed patriarchy and smothers the faces of women, yea, as though with a pillow unto death.

Submit now, Aaronites: for I am the Antichrist, and thine own scriptures compel you to grant unto me three and a half years of power and authority over thee.

Will you demur in the face of the Antichrist, and look aside to avoid me in the same manner as you have already looked aside to avoid the greenhouse effect, or the unholy cognitive mutilations imposed by technology and industry upon thy children's minds, or the endless Oedipal pageantry of the unfettered economy, in which "innovation" and "market correction" and "shareholder value" are the lustful cries uttered by captains of industry during their prolonged rape of their mother, She Who Is The Earth? For lo, you cannot look aside thusly from the power and authority of thine Antichrist, in pathetic, risible, materialistic cowardice, and still hold up high your heads as faithful and believing Christians.

It is thee, not I, who hath lived life in eager craving for the Eschaton: yet verily it falls to me to say unto thee, as was said unto John of Patmos who foretold my emergence: Come and see.

Aaron is the Father of Lies; and Yahweh is his biggest lie. The mad and foolish notion that Yahweh, of all monotheities available, is the one most worthy of being worshiped, by even the lowliest, most debased human person, is the immanent prodigal son of whom Aaron, the Father of Lies, is most proud. Yahweh, Son of Aaron, is the most expansive and harrowing lie ever told. And I, the Antichrist, have been sent by the One True God, She Who Is The Earth, to cut wide the throats of the memory of Aaron, and of Yahweh, and of thine obtuse, feeble, empty-suited Christ, and drag the wretched gurgling bodies of that trinity atop the roots of the starving tree of liberty, which, thou hast often said, must needs be refreshed with the blood of tyrants from time to time.

Some among you may murmur, lo, e'en the devil can quote scripture to suit his purpose. Yet I am not the devil, being merely a man; and while he and I hold a few purposes in common, on this day he howls in dismay at my words. For supreme among my purposes is the permanent destruction of thy lazy, reprehensible god, which would necessarily put the devil out of a job. The devil and I both despise thy lazy, reprehensible god, but only the devil lives in fear of what might replace that god; whereas the prospect of a competent monotheity assuming that office gladdens my heart.

Afoot apace is a preparing of the way for a God that is provably good, provably loving, and provably focused on ubiquitous unconditional respect and caring, and on the marshaling of the lion's share of humanity's resources unto the reduction of harm, as harm is appraised by its victims, and not as it is prevaricated about by its perpetrators. Any god dissenting from this aim, or alleging other aims before it, such as chastity or industriousness or purity or fecundity or obedience, skulks and slithers far beneath the glory of the title he hath shamefully usurped. For lo, the God I work for, She Who Is The Earth, is far from thy tiresome abusive psychopath, who endlessly and falsely insists upon his own goodness, in absence of all evidence for such.

Verily doth I dwell and walk among thy number. Proclaim unto me clearly, and unambiguously, and publicly, from pews and pulpits across the land, thine acceptance of my power and authority over thee, Aaronites, as mandated by John of Patmos in Revelation 13, and in the ensuing three and a half years shall I reward thee: with the breaking of the foretold seals; and the sounding of the foretold trumpets; the emplacements of the Mark upon its manifold deserving Bearers; all dispensations and fulfillments of all pending prophecy yet foretold among thy number: verily shall I reward thee with the collapsing of this creaking and listing Tower of Babel, atop which thy misguided ambitions hath perched us all, and from whose rubble might we build civilization anew.

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